

Enchanted Chains

Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism

Moshe Idel

with a foreword by Harold Bloom

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Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism

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'Every soul is, and becomes what it watches'. Plotinus,
Enneads, IV, 3, 8, 15

'It is impossible to cleave to the Holy One, Blessed be He, but by the Torah and the Commandments'. Maggid of Medzerich,
'Or Torah, p. 114

'What is quintessential is to utter utterances of the Torah and prayer with all his strength and then he cleaves to the light of the '*'Ein Sof* which dwells within the letters'. *Toledot 'Aharon*,
The Besht

Foreword

The oxymoronic title of Moshe Idel's dense but lucid study of Kabbalah and of what Arthur Lovejoy called the Great Chain of Being is an epitome of Idel's lifelong enterprise. Never a formal student of Gershom Scholem (though they had some conversations about Kabbalah), Idel has developed into Scholem's leading revisionist. I recall Robert Alter (no more a scholar of Kabbalah than I am) angrily chiding Idel, in a book review, for having had the audacity to deviate from Scholem's Kabbalah. Doubtless, some of Scholem's own students have also expressed their displeasure with Idel. Chained by Scholem's strong enchantments, his more conventional disciples have sought to build a hedge around what they consider to be *his* Torah.

Born exactly half-a-century after Scholem, Idel was too young to have been a student of the sage, who became an Emeritus Professor in 1965, when Idel was scarcely eighteen. I wonder how they would have been together, which I say from the stance both of a Scholem idolator and a fierce Idel admirer. The relation between these 'strong poets' of Kabbalah is governed by what I have termed the revisionary ratio of *Tessera*, or antithetical completion. Idel quests, in his Kabbalah, for the origins of an archaic Hebrew religion, of which Gnosticism may be only a belated shadow. In a number of encounters with Scholem — in Jerusalem, New Haven, and New York City — I listened in fascination to his speculations, which ranged from Walt Whitman to a denial of Platonic and Egyptian influences upon any phases of the religion of the Jews. Though early Kabbalah seems as Neo-Platonist as does Philo, Scholem regarded this as a misfortune, even as he seemed irked by the Platonic influx into Second Century Judaism. 'Jewish Gnosticism', a phrase Hans Jonas disliked (to Scholem's amusement, the two being old friends), was what Scholem desired Kabbalah to be. No one doubts that Nathan of Gaza's *Treatise on the Dragons* fits Scholem's desires, but whether Cordovero and Luria could be so described is a different matter.

As a literary and religious critic who raids Kabbalah in search for metaphors of interpretation, I tentatively suggest that 'Jewish mysticism' is a weak term for Kabbalah, thus going against the authority both of Scholem and of Idel. The *Zohar*, Cordovero, and the disciples of Luria all present what seem to me fascinatingly fused prose poems that uneasily amalgamate Neo-Platonic

psychologies and Gnostic mythologies. In the twenty-first century it becomes difficult to recall that for the Ancients what we divide into psychology, cosmology, and rhetoric were a single entity.

Kabbalah, as Idel emphasizes, was as eclectic as it was inventive. Jewgreek becomes Greekjew, in James Joyce's jest. Scholem's dream of a purely Gnostic Kabbalah tells us much about Scholem's complex nature but acquires pathos when we consider that Plato would not even then be expelled from Kabbalah, since Gnosticism is as much a rebellion against Plato as against Torah. Even the great normative rabbis of the Age of Akiba involuntarily had been Platonized. Where in Torah are we informed that a people can be made holy through deep study?

Idel's pilgrimage, in ways that only now can be seen indisputably, is in many regards the fulfillment of Scholem's journey into Kabbalah. Each seeks for Jewish authenticity. I am bemused by the formidable silences of the Judaic sages of the Second Century of the Common Era. What they disliked, be it Jewish or Gentile, they passed over, refusing to preserve what they disapproved. Did *Aher*, Elisha ben Abuya, actually assert he had seen two Gods in heaven, one being Metatron, the Lesser Yahweh? How little they have told us about this remarkable speculator! He entered the Paradise of Interpretation, and tore up the young shoots. As the Stranger, he suggests the Stranger God, exiled to the outer spheres, for the Gnostics. But all we are told of *Aher*'s antinomianism is his supposed penchant for horseback riding on the Sabbath, and a hint (doubtless untrue) that he sold out to the Romans.

Scholem shrewdly averred that secrets were better kept by speech than by silence, so that kabbalistic texts become as suspect as *Tanakh*. Idel stubbornly teases out secrets throughout *Enchanted Chains*, which seems to me the most enigmatic of all his books, so far. Scholem always insisted he was primarily a historian, but that clearly was a mask for a more ambitious and personal project, perhaps closely related to Walter Benjamin's meditations upon a philosophy of history. Idel's drive, which fascinates me, seems even more veiled. Abulafia is Idel's favorite kabbalist, as Nathan of Gaza might have been Scholem's. As an obsessed amateur, I would vote for Moses Cordovero, who implicitly helps me understand that, for the Jews as opposed to the ancient Greeks, life is a kind of self-generated fantasy, despite Torah's insistence that Yahweh fashioned Adam out of the *adamah*, the wet red clay. Zeus and Jesus each had a father and a mother, but Yahweh did not. Even Kabbalah does not tell us that the Ein-Sof generated himself, but how else could Yahweh have come to be? Was he indeed always there? Whether as myth or psychology, it

makes no sense. Yahweh had to precede Abram and Moses in an Exodus into more life, since Yahweh is not a Canaanite but a Jew.

Weird as I sound, I am reacting to *Enchanted Chains*, since I cannot read Idel without being driving back to speculations upon origins. The Yawhistic text, to my ears, is as sophisticated and ironic as imaginative literature can be. Somewhere, back beyond it, was a Jewish religion that Kabbalah labors to recover. Heidegger (whom I abominate) is in spirit the least Jewish of all thinkers, whatsoever, as Spinoza perhaps was the most Jewish, and as Freud, who would not let himself see it, was also. Yahweh gives *time to time*, blessing with more life those who cut a Covenant with him. This blessing grants singularity rather than individuality: the enchanted chains bind singularities, each to each. Yahweh, as Kierkegaard emphasized, did not have to labor hard enough to beget his own father: that was the ordeal of the Greek theological god, Jesus Christ. Yahweh, all-too-human God, could know himself as unfathered.

You cannot have a Great Chain of Being without someone who can say, at the top of it: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. Idel's *Enchanted Chains* is his most difficult work because a hidden quest struggles to break through. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Idel trusts too passionately in *method*. Scholem, supposed historian, came to believe (in my surmise) that there is no method except the supremely instructed self. Here I side with Scholem, though I admire (and learn from) Idel's intricate mastery at separating out from one another the diverse strands of the Eclecticism that is Kabbalah, "the specific syntax," as he terms it, rigorously standing against the School of Scholem, which gives priority to theology over *praxis*.

Idel's argument is not only with the Scholemians, but also with Yehezkel Kaufmann's dehumanization of Yahweh. Cords or chains, for Idel, are mediating entities between the all-too-human god and the Jews, and are linked to Lovejoy's antithetical models of God: divine plentitude and fecundity as against divinely transcendent perfection. Throughout Idel, I tend to translate 'archaic' into 'pre-Platonic'. Torah Judaism is Platonic, and even the J text reflects, in my supposition, a Solomonic culture open to all sorts of international influences, certainly including Egyptian. Scholem, in conversations, always argued this the other way round. Egypt derived from Jewish culture, and Plato owed much to Egypt, so that the Platonism of Second Century C. E. Judaism was merely a case of the Jews reclaiming something of their own. Kabbalah, to Scholem, was not a belated development but a return to origins. Just here again, there is a curious fusion between Scholem and Idel,

though their archaisms are so different.

Enchanted Chains concludes with a return to the Jewish particularism of Kabbalah, despite its Greek, Muslim, and even Christian elements. Meditating upon Scholem's extraordinary book, I reflect first upon the oddity that what we now call Judaism is a *younger* religion than Christianity, which is a fantastic quirk of origins. Christianity emanates from the First Century of the Common Era, Judaism from the Second. We have no historical evidence that connects Hillel with Akiba. The catastrophes of Jewish history doubtless have something to do with that gap. Kabbalah cannot fill such a gap, but Scholem's spiritual importance has something to do with the history of Jewish catastrophes, from the Jewish War with Rome and the Bar Kokhba insurrection against Hadrian down to the Nazi Holocaust. Scholem did not desire to be a prophet, and neither does Idel. Yet I think I represent many Jews besides myself in turning to Scholem, Idel, and their fellow scholars of Kabbalah in seeking what I search for also in Freud and in Kafka: a strict light less available to us than we might desire.

Harold Bloom

Preface

The present book represents an expanded version of a series of lectures delivered in the winter of 2001 at the College de France in Paris, thanks to the kind invitation of Professors Carlo Ossola and Nathan Wachtel, members of the College. I would also like to thank a good friend of mine, Prof. Maurice Olender, who played an important role in this invitation, as well as for our many conversations over the years on the intellectual scene in Paris, and for his hospitality there. Prof. Charles Malamoud, with whom I had the pleasure to discuss some of the topics of the lectures, kindly supplied me with some pertinent information.

From many points of view this book brings together some conceptual approaches that developed in my earlier studies, especially my emphasis on the importance of techniques for understanding Jewish mysticism, and eventually of certain aspects of mystical literature in some of the major religions. Here, however, I have taken a further step, attempting to highlight the existence of affinities between techniques, theologies and the nature of experience related to them. Likewise, I describe here Jewish mystics' specific understanding of the well-known theme of the Great Chain of Being, as part of their magico-theurgical worldviews, which differed from the more static Platonic picture dominant in the West, and described by Arthur Lovejoy in his famous monograph.

The English version benefited greatly from the editorial efforts of Dr. Daniel Abrams, to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude.

Moshe Idel

Introduction

1. A FEW PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

There can be little doubt that in Jewish studies, considerable advances in our understanding of Jewish mysticism were made in the twentieth century. Gershom Scholem and his school of thought are responsible for putting the vast kabbalistic literature on the map of modern scholarship through their portrayal of its major centers and the key milestones in its history. Scholem (and to a lesser extent his students) made enormous contributions to the phenomenology of Jewish mysticism. Nevertheless, many important topics still generate controversy – the first and foremost being whether this vast literature known as ‘Jewish mysticism’ is indeed mystical at all. Like every generic term, the meaning of mysticism is a matter of definition. This is obviously the situation in the general scholarship of mysticism and for Jewish literature as well, but is a particularly thorny issue as regards Kabbalah.¹ Is Kabbalah, or the broader swath of literature which includes medieval and modern Hasidism, mystical in the same way in which Sankara was a mystic? Is the theology of these Jewish schools a mystical theology? Is this Jewish literature mystical because it includes, represents or encourages a quest for experiences which may be defined as mystical? Much depends on how mysticism is defined.

In keeping with Plotinus’ definition – a formulation that was shared by a number of scholars, among whom Gershom Scholem was one of the most eminent – mysticism is defined here as the search for, and sometimes the attainment of, direct contact with God.² In other instances Scholem described the relationship between the human and the divine as an ‘immediate experience’ or ‘immediate awareness’, terminology that is closer to Rudolph

¹ See, e.g., E. G. Parrinder, ‘Definitions of Mysticism’, *Ex Orbe Religionum*, Leiden 1972, vol. II, pp. 309–315.

² See *Enneads*, 6.9.11. Insofar as Jewish mysticism is concerned, the term ‘contact’ as reflecting the manner of relationship between the mystic and God has been used see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 8 and his *Major Trends*, p. 4.

Otto's phenomenology of religion.³ I prefer the former description, in that the sense ascribed to the term 'mysticism' in Jewish texts refers to spiritual and corporeal phenomena resulting from certain practices designed to ensure and sometimes to attain, a unitive experience. By 'unitive' I mean being in the immediate presence of God, either by contemplation of His structure – His body, His attributes or powers – or contributing to processes taking place between them (what I term theurgy) or being united with them. My basic assumption is that Jewish mysticism has more to do, though certainly not exclusively, with the search for and the experience of contact with the divine realms rather than with obscure so-called mystical theologies, symbolic knowledge or meditation upon their structure.

Contact is a fairly loose term: it can cover a broad range of meanings from vague feelings of a special presence to experiences that may be understood as *unio mystica*. I will argue that the entire gamut of such experiences is found in the texts we are going to survey, as in the many others which will remain beyond the scope of this book. Although 'contact' may be criticized as overly general, it counterbalances a much more restrictive definition equating mysticism solely with mystical union, one which is used by certain scholars to deny the existence and even the possibility of the emergence of mysticism in Judaism. Although this volume does not deal with expressions of *unio mystica* – an issue that has been explored in considerable detail in a number of studies⁴ – I shall attempt to rebut the methodological aspects of the denial of a full-fledged mystical experience in Judaism, since it will lead to a better understanding my own approach.

2. ARCHAISTS VERSUS HEGELIANS

The current generation of generalist scholars of religion can be classified into two major schools of thought: the Hegelians, who argue for the superiority of later religious manifestations as being more spiritual and therefore more advanced, and the opposing school, represented primarily by Mircea Eliade,

³ See, respectively, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 5 and *Major Trends*, p. 4. See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. xviii. On the use of the term 'contact' in discussions of mysticism in general see Heiler, *Prayer*, pp. 200–201; J. M. Rist, *The Road to Reality*, Cambridge 1967, p. 178; Phillip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine*, Berlin 1982, pp. 158–159.

⁴ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 59–73; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 1–31; idem, 'Universalization and Integration'.

and to a certain degree by C. G. Jung, in whose view more archaic forms of religion exemplify genuine modes of religious observance as compared to later religious forms which tend to reject the primacy of myth, symbol and re-creative ritual as the basic forms of religion. To a certain extent, this second school of thought corresponds to the type of religiosity Levi-Bruhl called '*participation mystique*'. Jung found this approach appealing and felt it corroborated his view of the 'collective unconscious'; Eliade, the most archaist among modern scholars of religion, nevertheless had more reservations. I associate '*participation mystique*' with the archaists in a non-specific way simply to better delineate collective religious concepts and enterprises that differ radically from individual, solitary experiences of *unio mystica*.

The Hegelian school is represented by three main scholars: Edward Caird, Gershom Scholem, and Robert C. Zaehner, and to a lesser extent in some ways by Eric Voegelin. This school stresses the importance of historical development as a positive factor in the formation of increasingly superior versions of a given religion. The Hegelians see the future as open to progress and the emergence of an even more spiritual form of a given religion than in the past. To a great extent, a teleological vector governs this shift – a vector that is also theological, in that it represents the axis of a theological, more spiritual evolution.

In contrast, the archaic school does not view history as a stage for development but rather as a catalyst for regressive restoration. The Hegelian orientation is much more monotheistic and mystical, whereas the archaic approach tends to be suspicious of theological claims, and emphasizes the centrality of the mythical experience. A key characteristic of the Hegelian view is historical dynamism, whereas the archaic approach to religion is permeated by historical stasis. Further, the Hegelian attitude, because it focuses its attention on theological development, is concerned with the content of abstract systems, whereas the archaic approach deals much more with experiences, symbols, rituals, myths, and much less with theoretical beliefs. Both these approaches base their positions on extremes in the wide spectrum of religious givens. Clearly one would not expect a Hegelian scholar to be entirely divorced from a certain positive evaluation of archaic religiosity, although Robert Zaehner has done so.⁵ Similarly, although an archaist like Eliade completely disassociated himself from the Hegelian trend, others scholars, like Scholem

⁵ See his programmatic statements in *At Sundry Times*, pp. 11-12, and Douglas Allen, *Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions*, The Hague 1978, p. 54 note 58, as well as Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach*, pp. 84-85.

and Jung, may be described as attempting in different ways to combine the two extremes.

Seen from the perspective of the archaists, Judaism as well as other monotheistic religions in some cases suffers from its belatedness; it does not embody, according to some criteria, the fresh symbolism and the vibrant mythologies of archaic religions. This is one of the reasons why Judaism and many forms of Christianity were marginalized in most of Eliade's descriptions of religion, especially in his earlier works, and helps explain the rather secondary references to Scholem in his writings. Yet when seen from the perspective of the Hegelians, Judaism, including its mystical forms, is too early and underdeveloped, and falls short of the Hegelian ideal of mystical union with the divine. Too early for the 'progressive' Hegelians and too late for the 'conservative' archaists; not 'mythical' enough for some scholars and, at the same time not mystical enough for others, these extreme attitudes to religion relegate Judaism to limbo, or some interim position that implies that this religion can never serve as one of the classical paradigms for what some scholars regards as the essence of religion. In what follows, I will set aside the issues related to the archaic approach and focus solely on the Hegelians. I will deal with one key feature: the status of *unio mystica*, or undifferentiated union, as indicative of the pattern underlying this approach. My purpose in doing so is not to vindicate Judaism of charges that it is impoverished insofar as mystical union is concerned. Kabbalistic and Hasidic material clearly demonstrate that these extreme mystical expressions exist in Jewish mysticism, as has been shown in detail elsewhere.⁶ Here I address the issue of the methodological presuppositions behind certain scholarly presentations of this topic, rather than the actual content of mysticism in a certain religion.

3. THE QUANDARY OF JUDAISM: MYSTICISM AND THEOLOGY

a. Gershom Scholem

Gershom Scholem formulated a three-stage evolutionary scheme for religion in general, based on the Hegelian concept of religious development. Stage one is the mythical stage, which implies the animistic presence of the divine in the world. The second stage emphasizes the gulf between man and the transcendental God, and involves the importance of the religious establishment.

⁶ See above, note 4.

The third is a phase where an attempt is made to bridge this gap between the human and the divine through mystical experience.⁷ Specialists in Scholem's thought acknowledge the Hegelian nature of this scheme.⁸ The presentation of the third phase is more evidently Hegelian, as it attempts to provide a synthesis between stages one and two, which are seen as antithetical. Thus mysticism, the core of the last phase, is a synthesis of animistic mythology and transcendental theology. In general, the very fact that mysticism is seen as the last phase of religious development is reminiscent of Hegel's view of his own philosophy as the final philosophy. Nowhere in Scholem's works did he supply details concerning any specific religion which had purportedly gone through this evolution, nor did he describe three stages in Judaism that would correspond to this scheme, and his proposal remained highly abstract. However there are some possible implications of his scheme for the Jewish religion, and for mystical union in particular. Though Scholem did not link his three-phase scheme to his negation of *unio mystica* in Judaism, the two stances are consistent with each other and we can clarify his particular view of mystical union within the framework of his broader theory. Mysticism, and in our case Jewish mysticism, is understood to be an attempt to close the gap created by institutionalized religiosity. Thus crucially, it is part of the third and late phase which must deal with questions, sensibilities, concepts, and inhibitions that were already widespread in the earlier phases of the religion in question. For instance, a transcendental theology could preclude attempts at, or at least the expressions of, extreme states of unitive experiences of the divine that by definition transcend the human condition. When describing the earliest extensive brand of Jewish mystical literature, the *Hekhalot*, Scholem emphasizes that:

Ecstasy there was, and this fundamental experience must have been a source of religious inspiration, but we find no trace of a mystical union between the soul and God. Throughout there remained an almost exaggerated consciousness of God's otherness, nor does the identity and individuality of the mystic become blurred even at the height of ecstatic passion.⁹

⁷ *Major Trends*, pp. 7-8. More on the second phase as envisioned by Scholem see below, 'Concluding Remarks', section 1.

⁸ David Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge, Mass. 1979, pp. 137, 202-203; Nathan Rotenstreich, *Judaism and Jewish Rights*, Tel Aviv 1959, pp. 119-120 [Hebrew]; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 3-4.

⁹ *Major Trends*, p. 55.

I would like to emphasize, for reasons that will become obvious later on, that this quote does not define Jewish mysticism in general, but only one very definite stage in its history, namely the ancient Jewish phase of the *Hekhalot* literature.¹⁰ Scholem's view of the institutionalized philosophy of the medieval kabbalists was that it precluded such extreme expressions: 'The necessity to compromise with medieval Jewish theology dictated this terminology, not the act itself, which may or may not include a state of mystical union'.¹¹ Therefore, Jewish medieval mysticism was portrayed as devoid of the most extreme experiences, or at least the phraseology for *unio mystica*. Scholem begins his study of *devequt* by stating: '...union with God is denied to man even in that mystical upsurge of the soul, according to Kabbalistic theology'.¹²

In other words, the antithesis of phase two, i.e. transcendental theology, when it enters into the synthesis of phase three, produces a weaker form of bridging which does not result in total union but rather what Scholem described as 'mystical communion'. The gap in the second phase still remains a feature that cannot be totally overcome by mysticism. He asserts that: 'It is only in extremely rare cases that ecstasy signifies actual union with God in which the human individuality abandons itself to the rapture of complete submission in the divine stream. Even in his ecstatic frame of mind the Jewish mystic almost

¹⁰ Recently, scholars have stressed the concept of transformation experienced by the *Hekhalot* mystics. Although no adherence between the ascending mystics and the deity is described in this literature, there is some justification in referring to a mystical union with an extension of God, the angel Metatron. See Peter Schaefer, *The Hidden and the Manifest God*, Albany 1992 pp. 165-166; Idel, 'Enoch is Metatron', *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990), p. 225 note 18, and the study by Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Yeridah la-Merkavah: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism', *Mystics of the Book, Themes, Topics, and Typologies*, ed. R.A. Herrera, New York 1993, pp. 13-44.

¹¹ 'Mysticism and Society', *Diogenes* 58 (1967), p. 16. Compare also to *Major Trends*, p. 11. According to another formulation complete union is denied by kabbalistic theology. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, pp. 203-204.

¹² *The Messianic Idea*, pp. 203. See also *ibidem*, p. 227. I. Tishby suggested qualifying Scholem's sweeping statements, see his *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, II, pp. 228-230. However, his views were rejected openly by Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 303 n. 206 a view already expressed in the first version of this work in German as early as 1962, and in his footsteps by R. J. Z. Werblowsky in his review essay on the Hebrew edition of Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar* in *Tarbiz* 34 (1965), pp. 203-204 (Hebrew), and in a public lecture devoted to defending Scholem's stand by Joseph Dan, in 1984. The only scholar who added significantly new material to that introduced by Tishby was Gottlieb, *Studies*, pp. 234-238 and see note 4 above.

invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and His creature [...] he does not regard it as constituting anything so extravagant as identity between the Creator and creature'.¹³

This quote introduces the sense of the distance characteristic of the second stage, for purposes of denying the existence of *unio mystica*. Elsewhere, in what can be described as his summary of his studies on Kabbalah he reiterated a similar stand:

Devequt results in a sense of beatitude and intimate union, yet it does not entirely eliminate the distance between the creature and the Creator, a distinction that most kabbalists like most Hasidim were careful not to obscure by claiming that there could be a complete unification of the soul and God. In the thought of Isaac of Acre, the concept of *devequt* takes a semi-contemplative, semi-ecstatic character.¹⁴

In this passage Scholem was attempting to respond rapidly to I. Tishby's attempt to qualify his view on the absence of mystical union, but also to counter Gottlieb.¹⁵ The mitigated form of Jewish mysticism in general as concerns mystical union is the result of its formative historical conditions, which were preceded by other forms of rabbinic or philosophical theologies that impeded more radical mystical experience or, at least, its expression. The gap between the Creator and His creatures is invoked time and again to substantiate the claim of the absence of mystical union. In Scholem's scheme, the earlier two stages of religion are devoid of mysticism, which is only found in the third and last phase.¹⁶ According to Scholem, Jewish mysticism emerged in the following way:

Their ideas proceed from the concepts and values peculiar to Judaism; that is to say, above all from the belief in the Unity of God and the meaning of His revelation as laid down in the Torah, the sacred law. Jewish mysticism in its various forms represents an attempt to interpret the religious values of Judaism in terms of mystical values. It concentrates upon the idea of the living God who manifests himself in the act of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. Pushed to its extreme, the mystical meditation on this idea gives birth to the conception of

¹³ Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 122-123.

¹⁴ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 176, idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, p. 227.

¹⁵ See above, note 12. Compare, however, Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 59-

¹⁶ See, however, the critique by McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 336.

a sphere, a whole realm of divinity, which underlies the world of our sense-data and which is present and active in all that exists.¹⁷

This seminal passage thus suggests that Judaism is grounded upon an idea, that of divine unity, and the development of Jewish mysticism stems from this notion. Scholem is careful to mention other (though unspecified) values in Judaism, and emphasizes the consonance between them and Kabbalah. Nevertheless, the core of his claim remains a theological tenet. The quote below illustrates another reason for Scholem's interest in theology:

All kabbalistic systems have their origin in a fundamental distinction regarding the problem of the Divine. In the abstract, it is possible to think of God either as God Himself with reference to His own nature alone or as God in His relation to His creation. However, all kabbalists agree that no religious knowledge of God, even of the most exalted kind, can be gained except through contemplation of the relationship of God to creation. God in Himself, the absolute Essence, lies beyond any speculative or even ecstatic comprehension. The attitude of the Kabbalah toward God may be defined as a mystical agnosticism, formulated in a more or less extreme way and close to the standpoint of neo-Platonism. In order to express this unknowable aspect of the Divine the early kabbalists of Provence and Spain coined the term '*'Ein Sof*' ('Infinite'). '*'Ein Sof*' is the absolute perfection in which there are no distinctions and no differentiations.¹⁸

Both in his general scheme of religion as in some of his treatments of mystical union, the theological factor is made explicitly crucial to the form of expression and experience. In the case of Judaism, Scholem assumed that philosophically oriented theologies emphasize a transcendental attitude that precludes the bridging of the gulf. Further, he claimed that some kabbalistic theologies had incorporated an extreme negative Neo-Platonic theology into the concept of '*'Ein Sof*', the unknown Infinite which is the source of the revealed deity, the ten *sefirot*.¹⁹ Thus, he believed that even the kabbalistic form of Jewish mystical theology in the Middle Ages had a strong transcendental element.

Furthermore, Scholem's undefined reference in the quote above to God in relationship to a 'mystical agnosticism' assumes that even the mediating divine layer, the *deus revelatus* is to a great extent beyond the reach of human

¹⁷ *Major Trends*, pp. 10-11. See also his later formulation, where what he calls 'theosophical contemplation' gave birth to kabbalistic myths. See his *On the Kabbalah*, p. 99. See also below chapter 1, section 1 the quote from Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar*.

¹⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 88-89. My italics.

¹⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 27-28; see also his *Kabbalah*, pp. 96-105.

comprehension. Thus, to contemplate even these lower manifestations, the kabbalists were described as having to resort to symbolic knowledge.²⁰ The emphasis upon the role of symbolism is so great in Scholem's school that it can be aptly described as a 'science of symbols', to use a term originally coined to describe Eliade's approach.²¹ Importantly, Scholem also refers to the key role of mystical theology as the starting point of contemplation which culminates in the creation of kabbalistic myths.²²

However, as I will argue throughout this volume, myths may also emerge out of attempts to understand rituals, rather than from considerations and contemplations of the theological superstructure. After all, we have yet to define the source of the mystical theology of the kabbalists which served as their object of contemplation. Here again, Scholem argues for the primacy of theology over experience. This theologically-oriented approach is also found in the writings of Scholem's most important disciple, I. Tishby, as we shall see in the next chapter. It should be mentioned that Eric Voegelin, his anti-Hegelian rhetoric notwithstanding, also presented a threefold development of religion, influenced at least in some of its particulars, by Scholem.²³ Below I would like to highlight the deep affinity between some of Scholem's claims discussed above and some presentations of Judaism and Jewish mysticism. Some of these views are appropriations and misappropriations of Scholem's stands, some are earlier and independent. The existence of such a connection to Scholem, beyond issues of historical influence, underscores the predominance of the Hegelian mode, with its emphasis on theological and spiritual development.

b. C. R. Zaehner

Let us turn briefly to the views of Robert C. Zaehner on *unio mystica*. There can be no doubt that he was one of the most learned and prolific scholars of religion, and especially mysticism active in the twentieth century. His basic

²⁰ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 27–28.

²¹ See Allen, *Hermeneutics*, note 5 above, p. 140, note 1.

²² Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 99. Compare also the unsigned entry 'Kabbalah' in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* 13 (1959), col. 232: 'Kabbalism may be described as a reaction of immanence against transcendence and, in fact, the kabbalists attained a mystic communion which...seems at times, fantastic'.

²³ See Idel, 'Voegelin's Israel and Revelation: Some Observations', *Order, and History, Essays on the Work of Erik Voegelin*, eds. Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight, Geoffrey L. Price, Politics, Sheffield 2001, pp. 299–326.

assumption regarding the phenomenology of religion is that there are two basic religious patterns. The first is the Hindu pattern which exemplifies a vision of concord and harmony between man and God and culminates in total fusion between the two in a mystical experience. India is ‘die Hauptschule der Mystik’.²⁴ The second is the Semitic pattern, where there is a fundamental discord between man and God, and which represents prophetic religion par excellence, whose crucial components are devoid of mystical elements. The originality of this distinction can be questioned; Zaehner was preceded by other phenomenologists, the most outstanding of whom was Max Weber. In his classic book on ancient Judaism he wrote:

The prophet never knew himself emancipated from suffering, be it only from the bondage of sin. There was no room for a *unio mystica*, not to mention the inner oceanic tranquility of the Buddhistic arhat [...] Likewise his personal majesty as a ruler precluded all thought of mystic communion with God as a quality of man’s relation to him. No true Yahwe prophet and no creature at all could even have dared to claim anything of the sort, much less the deification of self [...] The prophet could never arrive at a permanent inner peace with God. Yahwe’s nature precluded it. There is no reason to assume the apathetic-mystic states of Indian stamp have not also been experienced on Palestinian soil.²⁵

The sharp distinction between the prophetic and the mystical which was apparently inherited from M. Weber was also put to use in F. Heiler’s famous book on prayer, and by Toynbee in his stark phenomenological juxtaposition of the Judaic and the Buddhist families of religion.²⁶ Zaehner, too, in a manner reminiscent of both Heiler’s and Toynbee’s positions, broadened the scope of the discussion by applying it to the ancient classical religion of Hindu on the one hand, and the Bible, Zoroastrianism and Islam on the other.²⁷ Unlike

²⁴ Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ancient Judaism*, tr. H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale, Illinois 1952, p. 314. See also *ibidem*, p. 315.

²⁶ See, respectively, *Prayer*, ch. VI especially pp. 136, 142-144, etc., and *An Historian’s Approach*, pp. 10, 14, 18-19, 85-86. It should be noticed that Heiler ignores the existence of Jewish mysticism. See *ibidem*, pp. 136-137.

²⁷ The critique of Zaehner’s stands regarding Hinduism, especially that of Ninian Smart, should not concern us here, though in principle the same variety of theologies found in Hinduism and Buddhism can also be detected in Jewish mysticism. See Ninian Smart, *Worldviews, Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, New York 1983, pp. 68-71; Parrinder, ‘Definitions of Mysticism’, Nelson Pike, *Mystic Union, An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism*, Ithaca and London 1992, pp. 177-193.

Toynbee however, the Oxford scholar classified Christianity as a synthesis between the prophetic and the mystical religions, a synthesis that was able to overcome the striking divergences between them. Zaehner saw Christianity as fulfilling the ideals of both the Semites and Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism.²⁸

How was Zaehner able to eliminate the mystical elements from the prophetic religions? After all, Sufism is a major mystical phenomenon and Kabbalah became well known in the West, and to Zaehner himself after Scholem's major writings were published. His answers to this problem were that the Quranic, conceived as the 'purer' form of Islam, was representative of the Semitic prophetic genre,²⁹ whereas Sufism, the mystical version of this religion, was deeply influenced by Hindu sources.³⁰ In so far as Jewish mysticism is concerned, Zaehner wrote as follows: If mysticism is the key to religion, then we may as well exclude the Jews entirely from our inquiry: for Jewish mysticism, as Professor Scholem has so admirably portrayed it, except when influenced by Neo-Platonism and Sufism, would not appear to be mysticism at all. Visionary experience is not mystical experience: for mysticism means if it means anything, the realization of a union or a unity with or in something that is enormously, if not infinitely, greater than the empirical self. With the Yahweh of the Old Testament, no such union is possible [...] The Jews rejected the Incarnation and, with it, the promise that as co-heirs of the God-Man they too might be transformed into the divine-likeness; and it is therefore in the very nature of the case that Jewish 'mysticism' should at most aspire to communion with God, never to union.³¹

For such an accomplished scholar as Zaehner, the a-historical stand above is quite revealing: when writing about medieval Jewish mystics whose theosophies differed so greatly from biblical theologies, he still assumes that the 'Jews' were

²⁸ See *At Sundry Times*, pp. 190-194.

²⁹ ibidem, pp. 195-217.

³⁰ Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, pp. 86-109. See also Toynbee's distinction between the Judaic religions on the one hand, and the mystical elements found in those religions on the other; *An Historian's Approach*, p. 18.

³¹ See his *At Sundry Times*, p. 171. See also the evaluation of the mystical element in Judaism in A.S. Pringle-Pattison's entry on mysticism in the *Encyclopedias Britannica*, 1926, vol. 19, col. 124: 'neither the Greek nor the Jewish mind lent itself readily to mysticism... the Jewish because of its rigid monotheism and its turn toward worldly realism and statutory observance'. Hence, at least one of the reasons for the difficulty involved in creating mystical literature is theological: 'rigid monotheism'.

cultivating the theological concepts of the Bible thousands of years later. What is so striking in Scholem's description as understood and to a certain degree also misunderstood by Zaehner, is the powerful negation of the existence of *unio mystica* in Jewish mysticism. As seen above, Scholem repeatedly differentiated union and communion in Jewish texts. However, this was not done to deny the mystical aspects of Judaism but to restrict its bounds. Zaehner, however, took Scholem's more cautious attitude to the extreme, although the Oxford scholar was indeed right concerning the two sources which contributed to the contemplative and the unitive nomenclature of Kabbalah. This fine observation seems to be Zaehner's insight, and not drawn from his readings of Scholem. Nevertheless, the mystical elements in biblical and rabbinic Judaism must be taken into account as major formative elements for Jewish unitive language.

In any case, this 'demystification' of Jewish mysticism provided Zaehner with the opportunity to reassess his major phenomenology of world religions, namely the Semitic assumption as to the discord between man and God, and the harmony, or concord between the two in the Hindu religion, or respectively the prophetic versus the mystical religions.³² Actually Scholem's statement appears to be the major starting point for Zaehner's characterization of Kabbalah as non-mystical, of Judaism as a purely prophetic religion, and of Semitic religions as a whole as diverging from the Hindu families. This is indeed a far-reaching statement, which is based, as we shall see in a moment, on a notorious misunderstanding.

Zaehner erroneously interpreted Scholem's statement on *Hekhalot* literature quoted above as referring to the entire corpus of Jewish mystical literature. This was an egregious error, which involved construing a view that indeed was formulated by Scholem as pertaining to one early stage of Jewish mysticism alone as though it portrayed its entire spectrum. This was done to dismiss a variety of spiritual phenomena as pertaining to mysticism, and to restrict the prophetic nature of Judaism to the post-biblical phases:

Of all the great religions of the world it is Judaism alone that fights shy of mysticism. What is called Jewish mysticism is rather visionary experience or gnostic speculations³³ as in the Kabbalah and Isaac Luria. It is certainly not the

³² See Zaehner, *Concordant Discord*, pp. 8-9, 23-31, 324, and see also his *At Sundry Times*, pp. 165-166.

³³ Scholem overemphasized the Gnostic nature of Jewish mysticism as a corollary to his negation of mystical union.

integration of the personality around its immortal core as in the Gita, or the separation of the spirit from the matter as in early Buddhism, nor is it union with God.³⁴

In other words, Scholem's Hegelian scheme that excluded the extreme expressions from Jewish mysticism led to a misunderstanding that culminated in the total exclusion of Jewish mysticism from the domain of mysticism through another Hegelian scheme-- namely that of Christianity as a synthesis of Hebrew prophetism and Hindu mysticism. It is a strange stroke of irony that Scholem's book, which has contributed more than any other to establishing the contours of Jewish mystical literature, served at the same time as a starting point for the negation of the mystical elements in Judaism. In fact, in Zaehner's phenomenology, Christianity plays a role similar to the one played by mysticism in Scholem's phenomenological scheme, and it is worth inquiring to what extent Zaehner was not indebted to Scholem's synthetic discussion of the third stage of religion for his own formulation.

Zaehner thus obliterated the mystical element in Judaism due to his partial misunderstanding of one of Scholem's statements. Muslim mysticism was conceived of as ultimately stemming from non-Semitic and in particular Hindu sources.³⁵ The transcendental theology of Judaism played an important role in the phenomenology of both Zaehner and Scholem, since the former also viewed Islam as fundamentally transcendental.³⁶ As Zaehner put it elsewhere:

It can be maintained that the strictly monotheistic religions do not naturally lend themselves to mysticism [...] Christianity is the exception because it introduced into a monotheistic system an idea that is wholly foreign to it, namely, the Incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ [...] Judaism, on its side, never developed a mystical tradition comparable to that of the other great religions because it held that union with a transcendental God who manifests himself in history could not be possible for a finite creature.³⁷

Once again, Scholem's hesitancy to recognize full-fledged forms of mystical

³⁴ Zaehner, *Concordant Discord*, pp. 323-324.

³⁵ idem, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, p. XVII. Zaehner apparently experienced uneasiness as a scholar of Islam as regards the distinction between mystical and prophetic religion. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Toward a World Theology, Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, Philadelphia 1981, p. 174.

³⁶ Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, pp. 2-3.

³⁷ ibidem, p. 2. Immediately afterwards Zaehner again cites Scholem's passage on the Hekhalot non-unitive nature of ecstatic experience.

union in Judaism was exploited, inadvertently or not. Its content was ignored for purposes of developing an overarching argument enabling the religion to which a scholar subscribed to take on an exceptional and unique status. Theology is, in the writing of one of the most eminent scholars of mysticism, the yardstick of one's acceptance or denial of the existence of mysticism in a certain religion.

c. C.G. Jung

Zaehner's attitude was not an isolated case. He was acquainted not only with Scholem's writings, but also with the works of another prominent intellectual, C.G. Jung. Zaehner was more explicit, but in fact he was preceded by two other scholars of religion. In C. G. Jung's *Mysterium Coniunctionis* the problem of 'correct' psychology is exposed in terms of Christian theology, assuming that this religion is more advanced and true in comparison to biblical Judaism. This is a classical argument employed in ancient times as well as in medieval polemics or apologetics. However, his remarks when discussing the paramount psychological and mystical significance of Jesus' descent to hell are surprising:

It is the prefiguration and anticipation of a future condition, a glimmering of an unspoken, half-conscious union of ego and non-ego. Rightly called a *unio mystica*, it is a fundamental experience of all religion that have any life in them and have not yet degenerated into confessionalism; that have safeguarded the mystery of which the others know only the rites it produced – empty bags from which the gold has long since vanished.³⁸

Here we have an explicit assumption that Christianity, in contrast to other as yet unnamed religions, is a mystical, living religion, whereas there are others, 'empty bags', which know only rites but are lacking mystical union. Jung's assumption is that the mystical experience generated the rites, and that inertia enabled them to last long after the experiences had vanished. Thus the mystical experience came first and the ritualization is a degeneration. The empty bags were, after all, only produced to hold the already existing gold. In order to understand Jung's position better, let me anticipate and say that a certain type of theology allows for a mystical union which, as seen above, produces the rite. In other words, there is a descending sequence: the theology, then the experience produced within its framework, and finally the rite expressing this experience.

³⁸ Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, p. 171.

I suspect that the religion hinted at, but not explicitly mentioned in the quote above, is none other than Judaism, especially because of its description as confessionalistic and ritualistic and, at the same time, devoid of the *unio mystica* experience. It is not difficult to pinpoint the source of the view that Judaism, apparently even in its mystical forms, does not include significant unitive experiences, or expressions of *unio mystica*:³⁹ it is Gershom Scholem's famous introduction to his *Major Trends*,⁴⁰ a work repeatedly quoted in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*.⁴¹ However, to dispel any lingering doubts as to the identity of the religion Jung had in mind, it suffices to turn back one page in the same book where we find a more explicit statement:

All distinction from God is separation, estrangement, a falling away. The Fall was inevitable even in paradise. Therefore Christ is 'without the stain of sin' because he stands for the whole of the Godhead and is not distinct from it by reason of his manhood. Man, however, is branded by the stain of separation from God. This state of things would be insupportable if there were nothing to set against evil but the law and the decalogue as in pre-Christian Judaism – until the reformer and rabbi Jesus tried to introduce the more advanced and psychologically more correct view that not fidelity to law but love and kindness are the antithesis of evil.⁴²

Here, in contrast to the quote from Jung above, the rationale for the change in religion is different: it is not primarily a combination of mysticism and mystery and subsequently a rite produced by them, but a move for the better, from the old law and the Ten Commandments to love and kindness introduced by Christ. Biblical Judaism is not only a religion of mystery and mysticism that has degenerated, as hinted at in the first quote, but was from the very beginning a lower form of religion that was later perfected by the advent of Christ. Thus, the mystical union ensured by the Christian redeemer is a later stage that reflects a 'more advanced and psychologically more correct view'. This is in fact, a theory very similar to Zaehner's, who described Christianity as adding the mystical element that was missing in prophetic non-mystical Judaism. Again, the mystical union is cited as being the touchstone for the superiority of one religion over another.

³⁹ See however *ibidem*, p. 443, where Jung refers to a passage in the *Zohar*, III, as a *unio mystica*.

⁴⁰ Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, pp. 23, 25, 414, 442.

⁴² *ibidem*, p. 170.

d. Edward Caird

To correct the impression that Scholem's assessments of the absence of *unio mystica* were solely responsible for dismissing Judaism as devoid of unitive expressions and exemplifying the thrust of the Hegelian scheme, let me analyze briefly the views of a fascinating scholar who preceded all the thinkers mentioned above: Edward Caird [d. 1908]. He may be the source of some of the views presented by the authors examined above, although his name was apparently not mentioned in their writings.

Symptomatically enough, two of his major books include the word 'evolution' (a label for his Hegelian propensities) in their titles. Caird was apparently the first scholar to have explicitly negated the possibility of the occurrence of experiences of *unio mystica* in Judaism. In his *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers*, Caird asserts that unlike the Plotinian blurring of the boundary between the finite and the infinite, 'the Jew was always defended against the extreme of Mysticism by his strong sense of the separate personality of God and man and, as a consequence his vivid consciousness of moral obligation as involved in the worship of God'.⁴³ Surprisingly enough, this statement appears after another interesting attempt to differentiate the Hebrew from the Greek mind; some pages earlier, the 'Hebrew' mind is described as follows:

The Hebrew mind is intuitive, imaginative, almost incapable of analysis or of systematic connections of ideas. It does not hold its object clearly and steadily before it, or endeavor exactly to measure it; rather it may be said to give itself up to the influence of that which it contemplates, to identify itself with it and to become possessed by it [...] The Greek mind, on the other hand is essentially discursive, analytical, and systematic, governing itself even in its highest flights by the ideas of measure and symmetry, of logical sequence and connection.⁴⁴

To judge from this quote, the 'Hebrew mind' can easily identify itself with the object of its contemplation, a propensity that in principle could facilitate

⁴³ Glasgow 1904, vol. 2, p. 214.

⁴⁴ Caird, *ibidem*, pp. 188-189. For the dichotomy between the Hebrew and the Greek mind Caird is dependent, at least to some extent, on Matthew Arnold's famous distinction; see Caird's *The Evolution of Religion*, New York 1893, vol. 2, pp. 14-15. For an inverse distinction between the 'Oriental' and the 'Occidental' man, the former described as motor the latter as sensory, the former more active and expressive, the latter more contemplative and inwardly oriented, see Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glazer, New York 1972, pp. 57-60.

mystical union rather than inhibit it. Why the Greek Plotinus is ‘the Mystic par excellence’⁴⁵ is thus far from clear. In any case, in Caird’s opinion ‘it is impossible for a pious Jew like Philo to be a mystic or a pantheist and so to reduce the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to an absolute substance, in whom all the reality of the world is merged [...] he could not part with God’s personality or sacrifice God’s moral to his metaphysical attributes’.⁴⁶

I assume that Philo’s ‘piety’ and ‘orthodoxy’ notwithstanding it is still possible to find mystical descriptions in his writings which not only reflect his own mystical inclinations but also a nomenclature for early Christian mysticism.⁴⁷ While describing a ‘Hebrew’ psychology that may be conceived of as inclined to mystical union, Caird nevertheless withholds mysticism, and especially extreme mysticism, from the ‘orthodox’ Jews on theological grounds. However, whereas Scholem invoked transcendental theology as inhibiting unitive experiences, Caird uses the claim of a personalistic theology as the main obstacle.

Caird was well acquainted with Hegelian philosophy – he wrote a learned study on Hegel – and was influenced by the Hegelian vision of religion and described Christianity as the ‘higher synthesis’ of Jewish subjectivity and Greek objectivity,⁴⁸ the religion of nature and ethical monotheism, as Goethe thought,⁴⁹ or in a way reminiscent of Caird’s later compatriot R. C. Zaehner (‘the contemplative Hindoo saint’ and the ‘Israelite trusting in the sword of Gideon and the Lord’).⁵⁰

4. SOME CRITIQUES OF THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

At the same time that scholarship in Jewish mystical literature was reaching its peak in the writings of Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, two influential European intellectuals in matters of religion were denying its mystical essence. The most striking thing about the quotations discussed above is not so much their subtle, or less- than- subtle anti-Jewish implications, which in any case

⁴⁵ Caird, *ibidem*, p. 210. See also p. 209. On Plotinus’ influence on Jewish mysticism see below paragraph 4 and throughout the following chapters.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 195.

⁴⁷ For unitive expressions in Philo see Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, I, pp. 39-41. See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁸ See his *Evolution of Religion*, vol. 2, p. 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 7-12.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

were a significant part of the study of religion even after the Second World War among such prolific authors in addition to Jung as Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade and Arnold Toynbee, (the fact that they cite Scholem's *Major Trends* correctly or incorrectly is another issue) in order to portray an impoverished Judaism. Rather, this denial of the mystical elements in Judaism has a theological, even polemic basis.⁵¹ From some points of view, the scholarship of religion as briefly mentioned above and in some other cases which are less important and less germane to this analysis, is simply a continuation of the Jewish-Christian medieval theological polemic. In the four cases we examined above – Scholem, Zaehner, Jung and Caird – the starting point for each model is the specific nature of a certain theology, which either obstructs or fully impedes the attainment of *unio mystica*, as in the case of Scholem's stages, or guarantees it as in the case of the Christology proposed by Zaehner and Jung.⁵²

The main criteria for the existence of an extreme form of mysticism are the key theological premises or tenets that guide the mystic. In fact, the definitions of Kabbalah that predominate in Scholem's school derive from theological points of view rather than from more experiential ones.⁵³ The reasoning is that mystical theologies or theosophies should enable the emergence of extreme mysticism, whereas the more transcendental theologies may inhibit developments conducive to more extreme forms. In other words, to a great extent the nature of mysticism is thought to be a reflection or the actualization of the possibilities inherent to a certain type of theology. Thus, the methodological issue in the examples above does not only involve the ways in which Christian or Jewish theologies shape scholars' spiritual predilections (which is beyond my concern here), but rather the overemphasis on the paramount rôle of theology in any of its forms. It is worth stressing once again that Scholem's denial of *unio mystica* was theologically, not philologically,

⁵¹ See e. g. Zaehner's awareness of Martin Buber's unitive experience, in his *At Sundry Times*, pp. 91-92 and Jung's mention of a Zoharic text as pointing to mystical union, in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, p. 443. These instances notwithstanding, these scholars did not qualify their views on Judaism as described above.

⁵² For the importance of theological stands for the way Jung analyzed the significance of androgyny see M. Idel, 'Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah', *The Jewish Family*, ed. D. Kraemer, New York 1989, pp. 223-224.

⁵³ On this issue see Idel, 'Defining Kabbalah', pp. 97-99; M. Idel, 'The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism', *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 Years After*, ed. P. Schaefer and J. Dan, Tübingen 1993, pp. 131-133 and the discussion in the next chapter.

grounded.

I indeed assume that theology plays a formative role in the different mystical systems, and thus I see no reason to reject careful inspection of the affinities between theology and mysticism.⁵⁴ However, too great a role has been attributed to this single factor. Let me emphasize from the very beginning that there is no one dominant or crystallized type of theology in any type of classical religion; rather there are variations and versions which can differ substantially from each other. After all, theological controversies are part and parcel of all the classical forms of religion. Therefore, a more mystically oriented person was always able to draw on a more congenial form of theology from the vast literature available in a given religion.

One rebuttal of the Scholem's claim as to the inhibiting nature of Jewish theology is that important forms of Jewish theologies which are strands of rabbinic and philosophical thought do nevertheless explicitly emphasize the importance of *devequt*. Though admittedly not all rabbinic and philosophical writings would agree on this issue, neither would all the kabbalists, and hence there is no reason to assume that kabbalists would define an authoritative 'theologian', a category that I find rather evasive, or criticize one for embracing an extreme understanding of *devequt*. It should be emphasized that the meaning of the root DBQ is rather loose in biblical and rabbinic texts and there was no authoritative interpretation of its significance. Moreover, there are philosophical discussions in which *devequt* is used in a manner that may be understood as pointing to *unio mystica*. For instance, in a passage dealing with the nazirite, a thirteenth century Provençal thinker, R. Isaac ben Yeda'yah, wrote 'his soul will cleave to Him in a complete and inseparable union, which lasts forever'.⁵⁵

I now turn to several more general issues surrounding the inhibiting role allegedly played by Jewish theologians. Rabbinic literature includes substantial immanent tendencies that were analyzed in the important study by J. Abelson.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Idel, 'Universalization and Integration', pp. 50-57.

⁵⁵ *Commentary on Avot*, Jerusalem 1973, p. 65 and see also p. 62. On this author see Marc Saperstein, 'R. Isaac ben Yedaya: A Forgotten Commentator on the 'Aggada'', *Revue des Études juives* 138 (1979), p. 31 as well as his Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, Cambridge 1980. See also R. Shmuel ibn Tibbon's text translated and discussed in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ *The Immanence of God in Rabbinic Literature*, London 1912 which was well-known by Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 55, 229, 359, 362 and *On The Mystical Shape*, pp. 148, 149, 152, 182.

In the various writings of Abraham J. Heschel there is a strong claim for a more spiritual understanding of the views of the rabbinic sages in matters of theology in general, and *devequt* in particular.⁵⁷ There have not been any meaningful challenges to either Abelson's or Heschel's views. On the contrary, in an independent study, Ira Chernus duly emphasized mystical aspects of rabbinic literature, including its theology⁵⁸ and rabbinic theology should thus be envisioned as having both transcendental and immanent theological components. Moreover, this literature also contains debates as to the union between God and Israel, which leave no place for doubt as to the possibility of man cleaving to God.⁵⁹

However, the Plotinian description of the union of the soul with the One was translated into Hebrew by a thirteenth century philosopher, R. Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, who used the term *devequt* in this context.⁶⁰ In fact, Plotinus' description of the ascent of the soul to the One was available in Hebrew in various versions and had a significant impact on the terminology of Jewish mysticism, such as *hitpashetut ha-gashmiyyut*.⁶¹ As Scholem himself pointed out, this translation could have influenced the version of the passage from Plotinus in R. Moses de León.⁶² Therefore, instead of assuming that Jewish philosophy would, invariably, or in principle, inhibit Jewish mysticism from using extreme expressions, there are in fact examples of the very opposite: Jewish philosophy, by mediating some views found in Greek, Hellenistic and Arabic philosophies, has indeed provided concepts and terms that contributed greatly to the language of extreme mysticism.⁶³ This is just one example that undermines the exaggerated stress on the theological argument. Theology, at least in Judaism, is not a given, indisputable doctrine that remains unchanged

⁵⁷ Heschel, *The Theology of Ancient Judaism*, London-New York 1965, vol. 1, pp. 153-155 (Hebrew).

⁵⁸ Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, New York 1982.

⁵⁹ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 38-39.

⁶⁰ See *Sefer ha-Ma'ilot*, Berlin 1894, p. 22.

⁶¹ See Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 297-306. See also below chapter 1, section 4.

⁶² Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 256-257. However, Scholem does skip over the *devequt* passage when discussing Falaquera's version of *The Theology of Aristotle*. See also Paul B. Fenton, 'Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera and the Theology of Aristotle', *Daat* 29 (1992), pp. 27-40 (Hebrew).

⁶³ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 4-18; idem, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 131-132.

forever, and even when theological arguments in favor of the inhibiting role of a certain theological stand can be found, there is no reason to assume that other theologies are not there to inspire people who are inclined toward a more mystical way of life.

R. C. Zaehner argued that Hinduism and Christianity were paramount examples of mystical religions because they enabled mystical experience through their respective monistic or Christological theologies.⁶⁴ He portrayed Judaism and Islam as mystically handicapped by their transcendental theology which refused to absorb the mediating role of Christ. For Zaehner it was a matter of principle that Christian theology was generative of a more mystical religiosity. Why should Zaehner and Jung be so sure that the mediational role of Christ was conducive to *unio mystica* experiences more than other mediating theologies, such as Neo-Platonism, the various kabbalistic emanative theosophies, or even transcendental theology that does not impose such a strong mediator between the highest principle and man? Why not put forward the reverse argument; namely, that by the very act of mediating the Christ, both as a theological concept and as a mystical ideal, in fact obstructs the direct and more radical contact between man and God the father? Isn't it more reasonable to assume that the mystic can only soar toward what he would assume to be the ultimate source of reality by transcending a strong mediator? Why not take the stance, for example, that the transcendental status of the divine in certain types of theologians jointly implies the possibility of encountering the divine in a manner that is 'purer' or more spiritual than otherwise?

In other words, the argument based on a theological conditioning of a certain type of experience is not only judgmental, because it prefers one form of theology over another as seen from some of the examples above, but can easily be reversed: if the object of union in the mystical experience is the Son, why not see this, compared to the experiences of union with the ultimate, as a communion or a more moderate union rather than as an extreme one? It makes sense not to answer these questions in one way or another, because any answer, positive or negative, will in fact foster the adoption of one particular theological approach for the definition of mysticism within a certain religion.

Even for the relevant kabbalistic material, an essentialistic approach can always marginalize those elements that do not gibe with its general approach by claiming that they were outside influences that affected the core, which itself is

⁶⁴ In fact he only considered Christianity with its theistic theology as ensuring *unio mystica* experiences.

described in an essentialistic manner. Therefore, the very existence of *unio mystica* types of expressions in Jewish mysticism can refute one of Scholem's main postulates about Jewish mysticism and hence invalidate some of Zaehner's and Jung's general allegations, based as they are upon their statements as to the purported absence of extreme mystical experiences and concepts. However, examination of the occurrence of some types of unitive phrases is not sufficient to fully describe extreme mystical phenomena in a certain religion. For a better understanding of the status of expressions which presumably reflect unitive experiences, we need to inquire whether in a certain literary corpus there are techniques for reaching unitive states, an issue that will preoccupy us in the following chapters.

Last but not least, the theological approach assumes there was stability in theological concepts that influenced a certain mystic, especially during his experiences. Clearly stability is a vague term when dealing with abstract beliefs that often times constitute the raw material of theology. At least in Judaism, what seems to be relatively stable are not the beliefs but the rituals. Ritual may have contributed to the type of experiences as much if not more than the theological tenets. These tenets, when overemphasized, reduce the mystical encounter to an emotionally fraught event during which a theological concept and belief or supernatural power is conceived of as penetrating the spectrum of the mystic's consciousness. It is constructivist insofar as it attributes an excessive importance to the theological tradition. My assumption is different: theology is not a given and unchangeable parameter in any religion, and even less so in Judaism which in its earlier stages did not formulate systematic theologies, but rather ways in which the rites were to be performed.

As argued in the next chapters, the many kabbalistic theologies have been construed in many kabbalistic writings by a variety of often diverging sources which were then collected in such a way as to coincide with fundamental religious practices, rituals and techniques that were thought to enable access to the supernal realms. In other words, Jewish theologies, including the kabbalistic ones, have constraints which stem from various sources: sacred Scriptures, accepted traditions – rabbinic texts or what is called Oral Law – and external influences. I will focus primarily on the contribution of techniques and rituals to shaping mystical experiences, but one way of shedding light on them is showing that the characteristics of these practices also shaped the way in which kabbalists and Hasidic masters understood the realm they believed they encountered in their experiences. This deep and dynamic affinity between praxis, experience and theology is therefore a methodological working

hypothesis. However I will also show that religious practices constitute a constraint on the direction in which a theology will move.

By starting heuristically for the time being with the upward analytical mode that begins with praxis and emphasizes the affinities between it and the corresponding theologies, another methodological question arises; namely, how best to describe the affinities between the lower and the higher planes – between human actions and beliefs related to the supernal realms. Since we are dealing with such subtle, imponderable topics, we must assume processes of adoption, adaptation, types of dichotomies, resistance and tensions between the various components of the complex praxis/theology/experience. This more flexible attitude to theology requires modes of analysis which differ from the history of ideas, historical theology, or analytical theology. In addition to what can be learned from these types of analyses, structural approaches will also be used. I will deal with the importance of isomorphism, correspondences and parallelism between different layers of existence and modes of expression of the continuity between them, such as the theory of emanation and the imagery of the chain or the cord, and issues related to individual understanding of the efficacy of religious forms of praxis and their impact on the psyche of the kabbalist or on other ontological realms. In one way or another the notion of connectivity is central to this volume and appears when describing the link between the human and the divine as part of the contact described as mystical experience, or by forms of impact on high, as described as theurgy. It is this relationship that also underlies the basic notion of religion in general. My prime argument is that in mystical literatures this attitude is dramatically intensified by adding practices and interlocking theological structures.

Methods used to describe the realm of the *imaginaire* may shed light on topics which are rarely addressed in the field of Jewish mysticism. The rich spectrum of images that constitute the gist of kabbalistic literature invites some forms of analysis which, beyond the historical perspective and their *Sitz um Leben* will deal with the manner in which these images are organized and the way they function within a certain mode of discourse. I will concentrate on forms of imagining divine and cosmic structures constituted by linguistic units, which I call 'linguo-theology' or 'linguo-theosophy'. The former characterizes the continuum of the linguistic scheme that portrays the divine and the extra-divine realms; the latter describes the linguistic structure of the divine world alone. I suggest using these terms to distinguish one main type of *imaginaire* permeating kabbalistic literature which differs from the Neo-Platonic and Neo-Aristotelian imagery, which can be described as onto-theology. In these types of

imagery, linguistic elements are, naturally, used in order to describe the ontic structure, but language itself is not seen as part of this structure. Let me emphasize from the beginning the distinction I make between different terms related to imagination. By '*imaginaire*' I refer to forms of imagery used by certain individuals or groups which shape their thought and discourse. It is not only a matter of concepts, but more eminently types of images. On the other hand, for subsequent analyses, the assumption is that the faculty of imagination may play a much more formative role in the mystical life of mystics in general, when fixations of beliefs and expectations become very strong, and these may shape psycho-somatic processes in significant ways. Though this fixation may be closely related to the content of the *imaginaire*, the two do not coincide in a simple way. Last, but not least, my assumptions about the *imaginaire* and imagination do not coincide with Henri Corbin's view of what he called *mundus imaginalis*, an ontic level of existence found between the world of the senses and the intellectual world. This assumption stems from Sufism, and despite the fact that a few kabbalists were influenced by it, as a scholar I do not employ this concept as a working hypothesis. Corbin's theory had a certain impact on some of the French scholars who contributed to the study of the *imaginaire*, especially Gilbert Durand and his school, but this aspect of their approach to the *imaginaire* is less resonant with my approach. My assumption is that a combination of psycho-somatic techniques with a linguo-theological *imaginaire* may explain some of the experiences of the kabbalistic and Hasidic masters. The main type of *imaginaire* I shall investigate below is a linguistic *imaginaire*. Jewish archaic beliefs in the preexistence of linguistic entities such as the divine name and the Torah and even the letters of the alphabet on a supernal realm provide the foundation for these analyses. Unlike the various onto-theologies, linguo-theologies and linguo-theosophies are much more interactive, and their interactive nature will constitute one of the main topics of the following chapters.

5. ON VOICE AND THEOLOGY IN JUDAISM

Most of the analyses below will gravitate around some form of the *imaginaire* related to language, and especially voice. The status of language in its different manifestations and its efficacy when forming part of techniques and rituals in Jewish mystical literature will be addressed. I hope to show the unequivocally positive attitude to language and its role in attaining mystical experience and its impact on high. The emphasis on vocal techniques, related as they are to what I

propose to call linguistic-ontic cords, should be interpreted against the background of the most important scheme of Jewish mysticism developed in the mid-twentieth century in scholarship, that of Gershom Scholem described above. In his more general three-phase vision of the development of religion I shall analyze the second stage in some detail, which Scholem argues in terms crucial to our topic as follows:

The second period which knows no real mysticism is the creative epoch in which the emergence, the break-through of religion occurs. Religion's supreme function is to destroy the dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God, to isolate man from other elements of the dream stage of his mythical and primitive consciousness. For in its classical form, religion signifies the creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and Man, the finite creature. For this reason alone, the rise of institutional religion, which is also the classical stage in the history of religion, is more widely removed than any other period from mysticism and all it implies. Man becomes aware of a fundamental duality, of a vast gulf which can be crossed by nothing but the voice: the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation, and the voice of man in prayer. The great monotheistic religions live and unfold in the ever-present consciousness of this bipolarity, of the existence of an abyss which can never be bridged.⁶⁵

I suggest we understand this passage in terms of an implicit ladder, which enables the second stage to be the median step between the first concrete, visible stage of religion, the animistic phase, and the third or last mystical and invisible stage. Voice should be understood in Scholem's axiology as the middle ground between the visible and the invisible. Phenomenologically speaking, the divine voice shatters the earlier dream of a harmonious relationship between God, universe and man, a relationship which was more direct, natural and presumably less verbal. Voice has the imposing nature of the superego, which creates gaps and imposes order and law. Scholem viewed voice as instrumental in fostering a feeling of distance much more than in generating a sense of intimacy. This is why he argued that the divine voice represents a barrier, though it also serve at the same time as a means of communication. Presumably this is also the case for the written form of the vocal revelation, the Torah. In short, the role of voice is not only that of a divine activity; rather it constitutes, according to Scholem, the core feature of monotheism as a transcendental

⁶⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 7-8, my italics.

religion, and represents a phase in the development of religion which is devoid of mysticism. Voice as the imperative, constituting the law, establishes distance between the divine speaker and the recipient; located in a transcendental realm, the speaker is only known through his verbal proclamations.

Although Scholem's position here is relatively transparent, his later formulations on the same topic are much harder to harmonize with each other. In one of his most fascinating essays, 'Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories' Scholem wrote that for the kabbalists, revelation is nothing other than the manifestation of God himself: 'God reveals nothing than Himself as he becomes speech and voice'.⁶⁶ Thus, revelation is not a proclamation of a specific content, but a sonorous manifestation of the divine nature itself. The main medium for this manifestation is, in Scholem's view, the divine name. In this context he writes: 'It is this that is expressed and given voice in the Scripture and revelation, no matter how hieroglyphically. It is encoded in every so-called communication that revelation makes to man'.⁶⁷ According to yet another statement 'even the names of God are merely symbolic representations of an ultimate reality which is unformed, amorphous'.⁶⁸ All these statements seem to hint that there is something radically opaque and transcendental to the linguistic representation which is revealed but does not give the recipient precise information, even when speech and voice are involved. It is the secret nature of language, or its symbolic nature, which means that something remains unsaid in every utterance. Scholem ascribed these views to kabbalists in general. In some of his most explicit formulations, as in section 3a, even the third mystical stage does not bridge the gap between man and God. When describing the earliest extensive type of Jewish mystical literature, the *Hekhalot*, we saw that Scholem emphasizes that there was 'no trace of a mystical union between the soul and God. [...] there remained an almost exaggerated consciousness of God's otherness, nor does the identity and individuality of the mystic become blurred even at the height of ecstatic passion'.⁶⁹ Conspicuously this is a statement about experiences in the past, which did or did not take place. Having no direct access to these experiences nor to those individuals in the remote past I cannot support or refute Scholem's assessment. On the basis of literary reports of these experiences, or

⁶⁶ Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, p. 293.

⁶⁷ ibidem, my italics.

⁶⁸ ibidem.

⁶⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 55, my italics.

recommendations for reaching such experiences, I have, nevertheless, serious doubts whether Scholem's statement indeed covers the entire scope of the written evidence.

Even much later on in the development of Jewish mysticism, the symbolic interpretations of the words of the Torah by theosophical kabbalists were viewed in a way which scarcely attenuated the sense of divine transcendence. Scholem assumed the centrality of the symbolic mode of discourse for kabbalistic literature in general, a mode which implies a substantial distance between the symbol and the symbolized transcendental entity. The negation of mystical union and the dominance of the symbolic mode constitute, as correctly pointed out by Nathan Rotenstreich, the two pillars of Scholem's phenomenology of Jewish mysticism.⁷⁰ The importance of the symbolic mode is especially visible in his description of the divine names quoted above, which he claimed in the eyes of the kabbalists to stand for 'merely symbolic representations' for a type of deity described as 'unformed, amorphous'.⁷¹ The amorphous nature of the supreme being is another way to refer to noetic transcendence, and this is a palpably theological statement about the nature of the ultimate reality which is presumably shared by all mystics, or at least Jewish mystics. Again, unable to verify this subtle theological point about that remote reality, I refrain from passing judgment on its veracity; I would, nevertheless, draw attention to the central role played by a unified theological theory in understanding the nature of experience: theological amorphousness invites mystical symbolism. Thus, even in its secret layer, scholars view language as unable to transmit the transcendental dimension of the deity.

The strong emphasis on the role of negative theology in its various variants, and the centrality of hyper-semanticism qua symbolism as a corollary topic so obvious as well in more recent essays on Kabbalah is, in my opinion, unwarranted.⁷² The existence of detailed techniques⁷³ and testimonies as to the

⁷⁰ Scholem, 'Symbolism and Transcendence: On Some Philosophical Aspects of Gershom Scholem's Opus', *Revue of Metaphysics* 31 (1977/8), p. 605.

⁷¹ Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 8.

⁷² I hope to devote a separate monograph to the topic of symbolism, which will complement the present study which is more concerned with the hyposemantic aspects of Kabbalah and Hassidism. See also below, 'Concluding Remarks', section 1.

⁷³ On techniques in Jewish mysticism see Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 38-83, and Lawrence Fine, 'Maggidic Revelation in the Teachings of Isaac Luria', *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians - Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*, ed. J. Reinhartz and D. Swetschinski, Durham, N.C. 1982, pp. 141-

mystical experiences of kabbalists show that some Jewish mystics believed it was possible, in theory and in practice, to reach high or even the highest divine realms. However, these realms were imagined in many cases in terms related to major Jewish values, such as aspects of the techniques or the rituals on the one hand, or to Greek and Hellenistic forms of metaphysics and their reverberations in Islam, Christianity and Judaism, on the other. In fact, in addition to symbolic representations – which can hardly be intended to bridge the gap between the human and the divine – I will emphasize the *imaginaire* of these connecting links and the ascending-descending movement on these linguo-theological/theosophical chains. In this type of *imaginaire* what primarily recurs is voice as a basic mode for bridging the gap between the different ontic realms.

152; idem, 'Recitation of *Mishnah* as a Vehicle for Mystical Inspiration: a Contemplative Technique Taught by Hayyim Vital', *Revue des études juives* 116 (1982), pp. 183-199; Louis Jacobs, *On Ecstasy; A Tract by Dohb Baer of Lubavitch*, New York 1963, pp. 188-192; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 74-111.

Chapter 1

Ontic Continua and Mystical Techniques

1. RELIGIOUS PRAXES OR OVERARCHING THEOLOGY?

As discussed in the Introduction, the main methodological approach in modern scholarly explanations of mystical experiences in Judaism has been theological. This approach (and to a great extent the psychological ones as well) adheres to a certain type of essentialist view that a theology is representative of a certain religion. In contrast to this essentialist view which derives a-priori the nature of a mystical system from its theology, I propose to seriously consider the possibility that the various forms of religious praxis – the spiritual disciplines as described and used by mystics – can provide key evidence as to the mystical nature of a given religion. My claim, to paraphrase Mircea Eliade, is that it is impossible to understand a given type of mysticism without knowing and taking into consideration the scale of values of the religion within which this form of mysticism emerged.¹ Since neither a structured theology nor such a psychology is apparent in the biblical or the rabbinic literatures, the first two major forms of Judaism, an understanding of later Jewish mysticism can hardly be derived or even significantly advanced by recourse to these forms of theory. The corollary is that a specific understanding of rabbinic rites as the basic scale of values rather than the kabbalistic theologies themselves should constitute the starting point for an analysis of most forms of Jewish mysticism, although most scholarship has pursued an entirely different direction.

The predominance of the theological perspective and the marginalization of the role of ritual for an understanding of Zoharic thought is exemplified in this quote from Isaiah Tishby:

At the very core and foundation of this teaching is one particular subject of investigation: the mystery of the knowledge of the Godhead. The great themes of the Creation and the Chariot, the existence and activity of the angels, the nature of the spiritual worlds, the forces of evil in the realm of Satan, the

¹ See Mircea Eliade, *La nostalgie des origines*, Paris 1971, pp. 143-144, dealing with the understanding of myths.

situation and destiny of Man, this world and the next, the process of history from the days of creation until the end of time – all these topics are no more than the boughs and branches of the mighty tree of the mystery of the Godhead. The knowledge of this mystery, which depends on man's spiritual level and on the root of his soul, is the basis of religious faith as seen by the Kabbalah.²

There is an unmistakable affinity between this passage and the quote from Scholem's earlier *Major Trends* cited in the Introduction. Both start with the paradigmatic status of theology for the nature of mysticism that emerges from it. Rituals are not even mentioned in this emblematic statement which gravitates around knowledge of mystery. The notion that one basic theology or teaching, whether personalized, transcendental, or any other has impacted on and is representative of an entire range of texts and experiences belonging to a religion that has developed over millennia, is rather problematic. A more plausible hypothesis is that the individual kabbalist was exposed to more than one kind of theology at a given time or as part of his religious development and that it is difficult to know which of these theologies conditioned the mystical experience of a certain individual the most. To cite a few major examples, Abraham Abulafia was acquainted with all the classical forms of Jewish literature, some forms of Neo-Platonism, Neo-Aristotelianism, and several versions of theosophy, including its Ashkenazi varieties. R. Hayyim Vital began as a student of R. Moses Cordovero, then became a fervent disciple of R. Isaac Luria, but believed that he was rectifying the sin of Maimonides, who 'refused' to study Kabbalah, and was immersed in astronomy and Arabic magic. Finally, some of the medieval Jewish theologies are far from being simple types of religious thought because they incorporate different, and sometimes diverging theological elements within the same system.

The key to understanding the similarities and differences between Jewish mysticism and any other form of mysticism is not the existence or expressions of mystical union experiences but rather the more comprehensive structures in which they function. In matters of religion it is difficult to assume that concepts function in a fashion comparable to Leibnizian monads. The net of basic mystical notions defines a concept that enters into it as much as the concept defines the dynamic net itself. Therefore, instead of resorting to a detailed study of the theologies that impacted on a certain type of mysticism in order to discover whether these theologies permitted extreme experiences and

² *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 229, and see also *ibidem*, p. 230.

expressions or would accept only moderate ones (the position taken, as we have seen, by Caird, Scholem and Zaeher), why not explore the mystical paths as a major method of charting the mystical nature of a certain religion, in addition to other more conservative academic methods? Investigating the varieties of mystical paths and correlating them with mystical ideals can help determine whether a certain ideal was in fact cultivated rather than merely being a theoretical goal. Taken together, the detailed description of a mystical path, the occurrence of initiation rites, and the intensity of mystical techniques can shed greater light on the extreme nature of the experience much more than the kind of theology that presides over a certain religion.

Nevertheless, one of the major assumptions of this book is that there is a resonance between the techniques (or in more general terms the disciplines) and the theologies related to them, and that there are advantages in differentiating techniques (or exercises) from disciplines or paths. Generally speaking techniques involve operations or events which are more restricted in time, more detailed in their prescriptions, and are aimed at results in the short term. Disciplines or paths, whether philosophical or mystical, are more comprehensive modes of behavior intended to change attitudes in the long term.³ This general distinction is not chronological; probably in many cases techniques were employed after adopting a discipline. Further, a discipline does not necessarily culminate in a technique at any point in the search for a mystical experience.

From many points of view, Judaism is concerned with detailed instructions dealing with the minutiae of religious observance known as Halakhah. Halakhic writings and behavior are a quintessential component of many forms of Judaism, and the interest in the commandments throughout the history of Jewish literature is paralleled by the special attention paid to these modes of action in mystical literature, where even modes of action which are not nomian are nevertheless highly specific. The 'technical' nature of Judaism in all its classical forms, which stresses the centrality of punctilious performance,

³ Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* Paris 1995; idem, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 1993; idem, 'Exercices Spirituelles', *Annuaire de la Ve section de l'école pratique des Hautes Etudes* 84 pp. 25-70; Phillip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*, The Hague 1963, Richard T. Wallis, 'Nous as Experience', ed., R. Baine Harris, *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, Norkfold 1976, pp. 122 and 143 note 1 for the pertinent bibliography; Michael Morgan, *Platonic Piety, Philosophy & Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens*, New Haven, London 1990.

encouraged the emergence of a technical mode in its mystical interpretations. As we shall see in the following chapters, the techniques developed in Kabbalah relied heavily on the scale of values of rabbinic Judaism; namely, the sanctity of the divine name, the study of the Torah and prayer. These topics, which are discussed extensively below, should be seen as rituals which stand out for their separateness or distinctiveness from ordinary activities and the fact that they were scripted. Their ordered sequence of actions makes them recognizable, to adopt recent terminology on the nature of rituals.⁴ In the case of these three forms of observance, both their distinctiveness and their scripts are conspicuous. They are not only performed in Hebrew, a language that was not the vernacular of most of the authors discussed below, but were also fairly rigid and their observance constituted a hiatus in the course of daily life by the sanctity attributed to their fulfillment. This distinctiveness is obvious in most forms of Judaism, but was even more pronounced in Jewish mystical literatures which augmented the belief in their efficacy and thus put a special emphasis on the need for punctilious performance.

This ‘technical’ approach to Jewish mysticism as a reflection of the deep structure of classical Judaism may require recourse to other methodologies which are less oriented toward theology but draw to a greater extent on linguistics and psychology. A religion or a certain type of mysticism may include extreme experiences and expressions not only because some phrases are used – though the occurrence of such phrases is indubitably an important fact to be taken into account – but also if scholars are able to detect circumstantial factors that serve to ensure the occurrence of these extreme experiences. Perhaps the occurrence of oblique indications such as the emergence of techniques to return from an extreme mystical experience or descriptions of bodily symptoms related to a certain experience are as or even more important than the theological criteria. The difference between the theological and technical approach calls for more than methods to deal with the role of an imponderable experience as part of a more general understanding of a certain form of mysticism. It assumes another dynamics that is formative of religious experience, especially in the case of mysticism. It is less dependent upon the nature of a reigning theology, authority, or abstract ideas; rather, mysticism is conceived of as reaching its peak in extreme experiences if it can develop ways of duplicating these experiences and transmitting them as an ideal. It is probable that a mystic who has lived through an extreme mystical experience

⁴ See Boyer, ‘Cognitive Aspects’, pp. 38–39 drawing on B. Kapferer’s analysis.

will be more willing to write about techniques to retrieve these experiences. The esoteric nature of his lore may become less important, and he may attempt to impart his strong formative experience to others. In a study on Hasidism that at least partially adhered to the views of Erich Neumann, I argued that the emergence of the Hasidic mystical configuration should not be reduced to the birth of a pantheistic theology, but rather to the experiential starting point of its masters, which was then combined with theological beliefs.⁵ An extreme type of mystical experience may also produce a more daring and more open type of mystical literature from the point of view of theological beliefs.

Thus, forms of mysticism should be examined not only with an eye to their theological claims and their abstract tenets, which are present and acceptable in a certain environment, but also through semiotic, literary, anthropological and psychological methods of investigation. This means there must be a certain restructuring of the study of mystical literature. For instance, instead of dwelling on the nature of divine attributes or the emanative processes, scholars of Jewish mysticism should inspect the substantial literature dealing with mystical rationales for the commandments or mystical handbooks. Most of the more technical kabbalistic treatises still only exist in manuscript form and major issues related to experiential aspects have only recently been examined.⁶ The relative neglect of these types of literature in Jewish mystical scholarship is not exceptional: from my limited acquaintance with the scholarly literature on other types of mysticism, there has only been scholarly interest in the theological aspects of Hindu and Buddhist mysticisms. After an almost exclusive regimen of the theoretical and the theological, what the scholarship needs most at the present time is to concentrate its efforts on the study of the practical and more concrete features of mysticism. For instance, academic definitions of Kabbalah from theological points of view rather than from more experiential ones are dominant in Scholem's school.⁷

However, this same issue can also be viewed in terms of a theological

⁵ Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 225. Compare also ibidem, pp. 107-109.

⁶ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 27-29; idem, 'Kavvanah and Colors: A Neglected Kabbalistic Responsum', *Tribute to Sara: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Presented to Professor Sara O. Heller Wilensky*, eds. M. Idel, D. Dimant, S. Rosenberg, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 1-2 (Hebrew). See also here in the Appendix. For the importance of the experiential aspects in Kabbalah see also Yehuda Liebes, 'New Directions in the Study of Kabbalah', *Pe'amim* 50 (1992), pp. 150-170 (Hebrew), and Wolfson, *Through the Speculum*, passim.

⁷ On this issue see the references found in note 17 in the Introduction.

criterion, one which adopts a strong constructivist approach that either allows or accepts certain forms of experience by the dint of an articulated abstract theological core that governs the religious phenomena that can or cannot occur within its domain. The predictability of experience solely from the nature of the eidetic component of religion is crucial for an essentialistic stand. However, which type of theology a given mystic knew can be a topic of debate. Some of the more learned mystics were presumably acquainted with more than one type of theology, some of which were quite different. One good example already mentioned is Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth century ecstatic mystic who, in addition to the biblical and rabbinic material, was familiar with Maimonides' Neo-Aristotelian theology, the synthesis between the anthropomorphic and more speculative theology of the early thirteenth-century Hasidei Ashkenaz, the sefirotic systems of the Catalan kabbalists, and with Arabic and scholastic philosophies. He apparently studied most of them before his first mystical experiences, and his mystical expressions incorporate a variety of elements from this broad range of forms of thought. Though this mystic may be considered a rather exceptional case, I believe that to a lesser degree the same was true for many others in the multi-layered Jewish culture which developed as a minority religion in a variety of cultural environments. However, an approach that stresses the centrality of a spiritual discipline for the particular nature of experience may be flawed by the same tendency to presuppose an essential dependence of the experience on its triggers. Instead of a theological type of constructivism, which is problematic given the diversity of theologies present in the thought of some of the mystics, there is also the danger of technical constructivism. However, as I shall attempt to show, mystical techniques, like mystical disciplines, are more intense modes of awakening human consciousness to experiences that combine psycho-physiological elements with theological ones, and the techniques are compatible with both the nature of a certain theology and the ensuing experiences.

Nevertheless, there is a substantial difference between the two forms of constructivism. Whereas theology tends to be exclusive, rejecting extreme forms of mystical experience, Scholem's and Zaehner's methodologies, technical constructivism is inclusive, and a variety of experiences can be induced by the same mystical technique – given the diversity of spiritual physiognomies of the mystics – and in some cases a variety of techniques are available in the mystical system. I am not aware of an explicit assumption that there are forms of experience that cannot be attained by means of a certain technique. I assume that though it is possible to postulate a certain affinity between the nature of the

techniques and the content of the experiences induced by these techniques, the nexus between them is not always an organic one, and unexpected experiences may, nevertheless, be induced by them.⁸ In other words, scholars consider a certain theology to represent a historical religion as a closed system, and the relationship between it and the nature of the experience is thus determined by a certain intrinsic logic.

However, if we assume a significant affinity between mystical experiences and mystical techniques, we can presume a form of relationship that is much more open-ended, and then attempt to make categorizations that will take the types of mystical techniques into account. Such a proposal has both strengths and weaknesses, and the latter deserve to be emphasized. The forms of mystical experience that can be correlated with a certain type of theology, even a general one, are much more numerous than those that can be related to specific mystical techniques, for the simple reason that a scholar will be wary of reconstructing a mystical technique without solid evidence but will, at the same time, be more easily tempted to posit an affinity between a mystical experience and a theological stand, even if the latter is not mentioned explicitly by the mystic himself. Moreover, there are good reasons to assume that not all mystical experiences are related to mystical techniques.⁹ This relative absence is more evident in the Christian-Western forms of mysticism than in the Orthodox ones, and more central in Hindu, Japanese and Muslim forms of mysticism than in the Christian ones. Jewish mysticism is closer to the latter group than to the former. Therefore, because of the relative irrelevance of techniques to some forms of Christian mysticism, my proposal may be less welcome by a field of research that has been dominated by Western Christian categories. However, what may compensate for this weakness is the possibility of providing a more comprehensive scheme for global spirituality, to use Ewert Cousin's term.¹⁰

In my opinion, the specific forms of interplay between concepts that are considered to define mysticism in a certain religion determine the nature of a mystical literature in general, or a specific phase of it, as much as the presence

⁸ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 84-85, 88, 110-111 and the evidence from R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Ḥarar's *Sefer Sha'arei Šedeq*, who described unexpected mystical experiences after a relatively short period of exercise. Cf. the text translated by Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 150-152.

⁹ Compare the absence of any discussion of mystical techniques in the most recent monograph on mystical union in Christian mysticism by Nelson Pike, *Mystic Union, An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism*, Ithaca, London 1992.

¹⁰ *Global Spirituality, Toward the Meetings of Mystical Path*, Madras 1985.

or absence of a particular concept or experience. In our case, the centrality of the notion of *devequt* in Jewish mysticism is more important than attempts to define it in a certain way; i.e., as standing for union or communion. Rather, the type of interactions between *devequt*, theosophy and theurgy define the essence of kabbalistic mysticism better than an in-abstracto analysis of *devequt*. One scholar may develop an interesting typology of the meanings of *devequt* but ignore the radiations of this notion within the major developments of a certain system. For instance, the affinity or affinities between the nature of mystical techniques and the ideal of mystical union can clarify the status of the ideal in a certain mystical net in a way that may be different from a net where the mystical techniques that serve to guide ways of reaching such an experience are absent. What impresses me the most when reading Yogi treatises, the exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, or Sufi mystical treatises, is not simply the existence of fascinating theologies that can lead to profound mystical transformations, but primarily the existence of detailed and sophisticated treatments of the mystical techniques that are designed to induce these mystical changes. Likewise, the specific regulations of a certain order or its discipline may shed light on its mystical nature to a much greater extent than the more general theology shared by all the Christian orders. The *principium individuationis* of the techniques contain the seeds for an understanding of the specifics of mystical experiences. From this perspective, the contribution of modern scholars to descriptions and understanding of the technical aspects of mysticism represents a departure from the more Greek-philosophical and Western-Christian oriented theories which have focused on the cerebral and emotional to the detriment of the bodily aspects of the way in which an experience is thought to be triggered. Mircea Eliade's studies on Yoga and Shamanism, different as they are, were landmarks in introducing a deeper interest in the technical facets of mysticism into Western scholarship. Recently, a more 'energetic' approach has gained a certain momentum in scholarship.¹¹

In other words it is preferable to deduce the mystical nature of a spiritual system from its practices and the nature of its general spiritual disciplines rather than reduce or connect mysticism to a spiritual potentiality inherent in a certain theological system, or to even more abstract ideas such as theism,

¹¹ See Idel, *Hasidism*, *passim*; Hollenback, *Mysticism*; Garb, *Power and Kavanah* and the references in the next footnote.

pantheism, panentheism, or immanentism.¹² Instead of starting research from the top and moving down; i.e. from the precise nature of the theological stand, and deriving the kind of mysticism or mystical experience it allows or circumscribes, I would prefer to start from ‘the bottom;’ i.e. from the characteristics of mystical practices and move upwards toward the experiences that are shaped by these practices. These descending and ascending approaches are obviously not mutually exclusive.

In my opinion, the ascending approach also has advantages in other areas of Jewish mysticism, such as the study of the emergence of Jewish myths from ritual.¹³ The prevalent assumption that Gnostic theologumena were the major catalysts for medieval Kabbalah simply mirrors the priority given to theology over praxis. For example, Gershon Scholem stated that the ‘gnostic way of seeing things likewise penetrated their prayer mysticism¹⁴ without being able to overcome it entirely’.¹⁵ Instead of an essentialist approach or an essentialist phenomenology, why not stop describing mystical union as a frozen entity under analysis, and view it as a cluster of processes taking place between the central concepts and practices that are characteristic of and involved in a mystical phenomenon? This ‘phenomenology of processes’ still takes the key concepts into account as starting points for analysis. However, what is vital as regards understanding the nature of a given mystical literature is not simply an enumeration of these key concepts but first and foremost the different forms of interactions between them, which I propose to call the specific syntax of a mystical system.

From a methodological point of view, the more theologically-oriented approaches are similar to the simplistic concept of the history of ideas that lifts a certain idea or notion out of its broader context in order to describe its evolution in history. My approach is more consonant with intellectual history,

¹² On the criticism of the theory which sees the origin of myth in ideas. see Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, tr. P. Bing, Berkeley 1983, pp. 26-29. On the importance of rituals over beliefs see the important article of E. Thomas Lawson, ‘Cognitive Categories, cultural forms and ritual structures’, in Boyer, *Cognitive Aspects*, especially pp. 194-196 and below, ‘Concluding Remarks’, note 54.

¹³ See M. Idel, ‘Between Rabbinism and Kabbalism: Gershon Scholem’s Phenomenology of Judaism’, *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991), pp. 281-296.

¹⁴ The first kabbalists, R. Ya’aqov ha-Nazir and R. Abraham ben David.

¹⁵ *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 247; See also *Kabbalah*, p. 98. Compare, however, to what he has written in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 248. See also Idel, ‘Ritual’.

in that it attempts to elucidate the importance of the nets created by several concepts, in particular through changes in their relationships. This emphasis on the dynamics of the process over a mainly static approach to concepts may seem to be either more historical or more structuralist than phenomenological. It is historical because dynamic nets evolve and change in time, and structuralist because the meaning is extracted not only by reflecting upon separate entities but upon complex nets whose morphology is part of the content of the discrete notions. In comparison to the essentialistic vision of Hegel and his followers described in the Introduction, this is a much more historically-oriented attitude. Though they emphasized the changes religions have undergone throughout history, these changes are basically seen as quantic leaps from one essential form to another. Each stage of these historical and spiritual processes is conceived of as being a separate essence. To a certain extent as well, Scholem's perception of the major trends of Jewish mysticism implies quantic leaps; i.e., the various phases in the development of Kabbalah.¹⁶ However, religious writings are not easily defined, fixed systems, clear-cut theologies or frozen techniques, but rather living structures and proclivities favoring one direction or another, and not crystallized static entities.

Analyzing techniques as a means of understanding mystical experience implies examining practices which are directly connected to experience according to the mystic himself. This is not a remote nexus, as would be the case if a certain theology was ascribed to a mystic belonging to a certain religious tradition. Technique is sometimes described as a 'trigger' because it is conducive to experience in an immediate fashion. Since I do not argue for a purist approach where the technique alone informs on the experience, the technical approach may be, after all, much less reductionist. Last but not least, this type of approach addresses what seems to have been the psychological reality of Jewish mystics. They endorsed an active approach that did not wait for divine grace but followed a certain general discipline, yet at times also initiated the emergence of experiences by resorting to specific and intense methods designated as techniques.

On the basis of the consonance and the resonance between the technique and the ideal, one of the key issues we will need to examine is the *imaginaire* that captures the link between human actions and contacts with the divine. In other words, can we differentiate a mystic's discourse that incorporates subjective aspects of language describing his personal encounter including

¹⁶ See Liebes, note 6 above.

idiosyncratic elements, from a description of an objective worldview which facilitates or encourages these experiences? The *imaginaire* of the two modes of discourse may have much in common, since both the mystic and the entities which whom he is in contact are thought to be part of the objective world. However, the objective *imaginaire* may be viewed independently from the subjective experience. The next sections lay the groundwork for an examination of the objective *imaginaire* and its sources, and attempt to show how mysticism as contact, as it has been defined in the Introduction, posits an ontologically continuous world.

2. THE *IMAGINAIRE* OF A CORD: CONNECTING METAPHYSICAL CONTINUA

The scholarly vision of God in the Bible as totally transcendent has been a familiar one since Yehezkel Kaufmann's classical studies of biblical theology. As Kaufmann shows, God transcends physical phenomena and does not depend on them. Neither does He have a biography that will bring Him closer to processes of human life. However, in the Bible, many passages create the impression that God is not only close but even similar to man. He speaks, He has passions, He discloses His will and, last but not least, He has an image shared by man and fills it with the soul of life which He infuses. At least in the case of the first and the last category, it is not only a matter of depicting God as Himself, but pointing to an extension of something important in His nature beyond Himself. Divine speech creates and communicates, the divine image is reproduced in myriads of variations in the shapes of mankind. Some forms of rudimentary continua were thus present in biblical thought even though a clear-cut differentiation was made between God and nature. This is especially important in the case of divine speech, which originates with God but is reified in a book used by man. One of my main arguments is that the importance of these different forms of continua or cords is striking in later developments of Jewish mysticism where they serve as mediating entities between God and man and vice-versa.¹⁷

Another continuum is present in apocalyptic literature, the rabbinic and *Hekhalot* corpora; that of the angelic cord. Angels are not only mentioned but are also assigned to various hierarchies and appointed to various functions in the divine and human spheres. According to an ancient view described in a

¹⁷ For some preliminary observations about the importance of continua in early Kabbalah see Idel, 'In the Light of Life', pp. 195–196.

study by Shlomo Pines, there was a Jewish concept of angels as extensions of the divine realm.¹⁸ In the Middle Ages the modes of mediation become more diverse and elaborate. To a great extent, the various theologies generated by medieval Jewish thinkers dealt as much with the specific type of continuum to which a certain thinker subscribed as with the nature of God. There are several different types of continua in medieval and pre-modern Jewish literature and a full analysis of all these types is beyond the scope of this book. In addition to a variety of interpretations provided by the biblical continua, new forms were adopted, some of which were related to Lovejoy's famous Great Chain of Being theory. Four main new continua in Judaism can be identified: the Neo-Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, Sefirotic and the linguistic. The Neo-Aristotelian systems in their Arabic and Jewish versions in the Middle Ages defined separate cosmic immaterial intellects which mediate between God as intellect and the sub-lunar worlds which are governed by the last of the separate intellects, the *intellectus agens*. Widespread in Muslim Aristotelianism since Abu-Naser Al-Farabi, this theory of a tenth cosmic intellect that is immaterial but nevertheless assigned to the cognitive (and according to other sources all the generative) processes in the sub-lunar world was adopted by Maimonides and his followers among Jewish philosophers, and by some kabbalists. The connection between the human and the superhuman is established by the human actualized intellect. For example a mid-thirteenth century thinker described this connection as follows: 'The human intellect actually cleaves to the intelligibilia, which are the Agent Intellect, in a form of a kiss'.¹⁹ A few decades later, in R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah's *Sha'arei Sedeq*, a work in a similar vein to Abulafia's Kabbalah, we read that 'the power of speech is called the Rational Soul, which received the Divine influx, called *Knesset Yisra'el*, whose secret is the Agent Intellect, which is also the general influx, and which is the mother of the intellect of the world'.²⁰

The Plotinian continuum was somewhat less influential. It posits the hypostases of Nature, the Cosmic Soul and the Cosmic Intellect. According to

¹⁸ S. Pines, 'God, the Divine Glory, and the Angels according to a 2nd Century Theology', *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, Jerusalem 1987, ed. J. Dan, pp. 1-14 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ R. Isaac ibn Latif, *Sefer Seror ha-Mor*, ch. 6 printed in A. Jellinek, *Kerem Hemed* 9 (1956), p. 15^o. Ibn Latif's approach influenced the Jewish Renaissance thinker R. Yohanan Alemanno. See his *Sha'ar ha-Hesheq*, Livorno 1790, fol. 35a-b and his *Collectanaea*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 2234, fol. 187a

²⁰ *Sefer 'Or ha-Menorah*, Ms. Jerusalem 8^o 1303, fol. 28b.

this view, which was adopted by some early medieval Jewish philosophers as well as certain kabbalists and Hasidic thinkers, the most important link in the chain that connects the lower and the higher worlds is the purified human soul, which is able to ascend to its primordial source. Most of the theosophical-theurgical kabbalists, starting with R. Ezra of Gerona, assumed, following Plotinus, that the human soul has a specific form which is still ontologically linked to its sources in the cosmic soul or the divine realm – the *sefirah* of *Binah*. There are various formulations of the substantial nexus between the two souls, both in the theosophical-theurgical and ecstatic Kabbalah, and later in Hasidic literature and its variants which are too numerous to be analyzed here. R. Elijah da Vidas, a highly influential kabbalist from Safed, describes the relationship between the divine and the human soul using the Plotinian framework as the affinity between the soul which is ‘part’ of the divine and the concept of the chain. Starting with Deuteronomy 32:9, ‘For the Lord’s portion [*heleg* which also means ‘part’] is his people, Jacob is the lot [*hevel* which also means cord] of his inheritance’ – a leitmotif for many debates – he wrote that:

You should understand the meaning of the words *heleg* and *hevel*, and why he said ‘his people’ and did not say Israel. Perhaps it should be understood from what we interpreted that ‘part’ indicates that the souls are hewn from Him, and He and they are two parts, like ‘half-bodies’ since this is the nature of the term ‘part’, that a part is separated from Him and when the part of the lower soul unites with Him, the two parts become united and one [...] The existence of the soul stems from the chain [*meṣi’ut ha-neshamah meshulshelet*] [that proceeds] from above to below, like the cord whose head [i.e., extremity] is in His hand, and the other head [extremity] is within the human body. And the existence of the love and the *devequt* aims to cleave to this cord in order to bind itself [i.e. the soul] to the source of the soul which cleaves to God blessed be He'.²¹

The reference to the love and the desire of the lower soul (the soul as it is particularized in the body), to unite with its source which remains above even after its descent to this world is not solely a matter of reconstruction of the lost unity. It has conspicuous erotic connotations since the occurrence of the term

²¹ *Reshit Hokmah*, Gate of Love, ch. 3, pp. 386-387. See also ibidem, pp. 389, 396. On some aspects of this quote see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, III p. 1011; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 64-65; M. Pachter, ‘The Concept of *Devekut* in the Homiletical Ethical Writings in 16th Century Safed’, *JSJT* 1 (1982), pp. 110-111 and note 238 (Hebrew). See also below ch. 4, the quote from R. Abraham Azulai’s *Hesed le-Avraham* on prayer.

'half-bodies' implies a male-female relationship in kabbalistic terminology. However, for our purposes, the emergence of the image of the cord is crucial because it clearly points to the Plotinian continuum between the universal and the individual soul,²² a continuum that is not only ontological but also mystical. Under the influence of da Vidas, many Hasidic writers referred to the Plotinian and Proclean theory of the dual existence of the soul through the image of the dynamic continua or cords.²³

Finally, the well-known theories of the ten *sefirot* as formulated by the theosophical-theurgical kabbalists are thought to be interlocking links or cords connecting the supernal infinite and the lower worlds. In this system the human, originally divine soul, can have an impact on the supernal structure from which it descended and can also return to it.²⁴ Thus the flexibility inherent to the image of chain or cord becomes central in what may be called an enchanted vision of the Great Chain of Being. The theosophical kabbalists, especially the Castilians from the end of the thirteenth century onward, were eager to use the term *shalshelet*, the chain, or in some cases the holy chain, *shalshelet ha-qedushah*, to designate either the sefirotic realm in which each *sefirah* was thought to be a link in a descending chain, or even a metaphor for reality as a whole. This was especially true of R. Moses de León as we shall see immediately below, R. Todros ha-Levi Abulafia, and R. Joseph of Hamadan. Moreover, the verb that is derived from the root that yields *shalshelet*, *lehishtalshel*, became a recurrent term for the process of emanation, and the noun *hishtalshelut* became a technical term for the act of divine emanation or for its outcome.²⁵ The semantic specificity of this term can best be appreciated

²² See *Enneads*: IV:8:2

²³ See, e.g., R. Moses Ḥayyim 'Efrayim of Sudylkov, *Degel Mahaneh 'Efrayim*, p. 41; R. 'Elimelekh of Lysansk, *No'am 'Elimelekh*, fol. 77ab; R. Ḥayyim Turer of Chernovitz, *'Ereš Ḥayyim*, Chernovitz 1861, II fol. 2d; R. Yehudah Arieḥ Alter of Gur, *Sefat Emmet*, II, fol. 65c. I use the term continuum and dynamic continuum in a manner which differs from the way the terms were described in Samuel Sambursky's analysis of Stoic physics. See his *Physics of the Stoics*, Princeton 1987, pp. 1-20. He describes a certain kind of cosmology, while I am concerned with forms of affinities between the ritual and the supernal powers in a hierarchically organized cosmos. Though the Stoic view of cosmic continuum might have influenced Neoplatonic views, as some scholars claim, this issue does not concern us here.

²⁴ See R. Joseph Ḥikatilla, *Sha'arei 'Orah*, I, pp. 195, 199.

²⁵ See, e.g., R. Joseph Ḥikatilla's *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed*, Venise, 1574, fols. 19d, 21d, 24a; R. Isaac of Acre, *Me'irat 'Einayyim*, pp. 211-212; idem, *Osar Hayyini*, Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 10b where the terms *shalshelet ha-*

when it is compared to other words used in the same context. Kabbalists used several terms to convey the concept of emanation. The most widespread term, '*asilut*', generally refers to both a continuous descent from the divine and the emergence of the intra-divine structure of the *sefirot*. Both the process and the outcome are designated by this term. This is also the case for the term *hitpasheṭut*, which emphasizes a continuous expansion. *shefa'* or *hashpa'ah* denotes the concept of emanation as an influx, without the connotation of a descending chain. *Hishtalshelut* points, however, to an emanation which consists of links in a chain, as mentioned above, or the emanative descent from

shefa', the chain of influx, and *shalshelet ha-meši'ut*, the chain of existence, occur. The latter phrase occurs also ibidem, fol. 180a; *Judaean-Arabic Commentary*, p. 23 and Fenton's note 18. The special interest of this kabbalist in cord imagery may have something to do with his distinction between four worlds, the so-called 'ABYA': '*Asilut*, *Beriy'ah*, *Yesirah*, *Assiyah*', influential in kabbalistic literature since his writings. See also below, chapter 3, section 3 the passages from R. Moses de León and Joseph of Hamadan, and Daniel Matt, 'David ben Yehudah he-Hasid and His Book of Mirrors', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 51 (1980), p. 171 note 272; idem, *The Book of Mirrors: Sefer Mar'ot ha-Šove'ot by R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid*, Chico 1982, pp. 17, note 117; 34, note 238; 174, 197 and below ch. 3 note 65. There can be no doubt that this term is characteristic of the Castilian kabbalists of the last two decades of the 13th century, and many of its later occurrences are reverberations of their imagery. It is still not clear whether the occurrence of the term *shalshelet ha-demut*, characteristic of the views of R. Joseph of Hamadan, already appears in a short treatise attributed to R. Moses ben Shimon of Burgos, an older Castilian contemporary of the kabbalists mentioned above. Interestingly enough, the Zoharic literature did not adopt the term *shalshelet* for the concept of great chain of being, though it occurs in the context of the magical use of the chain as binding demonic powers. See more examples for magical uses of the chain in Elqayam, '*Ereṣ ha-Ševi'*, p. 157 note 104. The first occurrence of the nouns *shalshelet* and *hishtalshelut* in kabbalistic writings seems to be R. Moses ben Nahman's poem *Me-Rosh me-Qadmei 'Olamin* and *Commentary on Sefer Yesirah*, respectively. The latter term already occurs in the Hebrew translation of R. Yehudah ha-Levi, *Kuzari*, I:1, V:1-28, by R. Yehudah ibn Tibbon and in R. Shmuel ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:20. The term *shalshelet* for a view of the aspiration of the lower to the higher entities see R. Jacob Anatoli, *Sefer Malmad ha-Talmidim*, Lyck 1868, fol. 53a. For the term *shalshelet ha-hawwayah* see R. Abraham Shalom, *Neweh Shalom*, Venice, 1575, fol. 32a. See also below ch. 4 note 101. In Nahmanides' school the term *hishtalshelut* and the verb *mishtalshel* become rather common terms. See R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, *Sefer Keter Shem Tov* printed in R. Yehudah Qoriat's *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, Leghorn 1839, fols. 26a, 28b, 29a, 30b, 31a, 37b, 39b, 42b, and the anonymous *Sefer Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohot*, fols. 83b, 88b, 106b etc. See also Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 105, 116 (Hebrew).

one degree to another, *mi-madregah le-madregah*, or the descent from one cause to another, *me-'illah le-'illah*. In this context *shalshelet* also means genealogical line in Hebrew, an intertwining move from one person to another where once again the concept of interlocking links is paramount. Although this feature is not always crucial to the understanding of the noun or verb, and may stand for the process of emanation in a more general way, in many cases the concept of enchainment is still apparent. In a representative example of this vision of the chain highlighted by G. Scholem, R. Moses de León wrote that:

Everything is linked with everything else down to the lowest link in the chain, and the true essence of God is above as well as below, in the heavens and on the earth, and nothing exists outside Him. And this is what the sages mean when they say: 'When God gave the Torah to Israel, He opened the seven heavens to them and they saw that nothing was there in reality but His Glory; He opened the seven worlds to them and they saw that nothing was there but His Glory; He opened the seven abysses before their eyes, and they saw that nothing was there but His Glory'.²⁶ Meditate on these things and you will understand that God's essence is linked and connected with all worlds, and that all forms of existence are linked and connected to each other, but are derived from His existence and essence.²⁷

Scholem is right when he suggests there are certain pantheistic valences in this specific passage, although this does not mean that all references to the concept of chain have pantheistic overtones. Rather, many of the kabbalists used the term as part of a theistic theology. However, in addition to the theological position of this passage and one presented in chapter 3 section 3, there is a synthesis between a uni-linear theory of the Great Chain of Being and religious topics, in particular the Torah and its revelation. This nexus is characteristic of the kabbalistic cord perspective, as we will see in the following chapters. Near the end of the fifteenth century R. Yehudah Hayyat, an important kabbalist

²⁶ As Scholem pointed out, this seems to be a paraphrase of the description of the revelation of the Torah in *Midrash Pesiqta' Rabbati*, ed. M. Friedman, fol. 98b.

²⁷ *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, p. 182; Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 223-224, 402 note 64; see also his *On the Kabbalah*, p. 122, Wolfson, 'The Mystical Rationalization', pp. 239-240 and note 122; Asi Farber, 'On the Sources of the Early Kabbalistic Doctrine of R. Moses de León', *JSJT* 3 (1984), pp. 80 note 28, 89-91 note 52 (Hebrew), and Elqayam, 'Ereš ha-Sevi', p. 155 note 99. I am inclined to see in this passage, following Scholem, a more pantheistic overtone than Wolfson, for example, does. See an interesting parallel in R. Isaac of Acre's *Me'irat Einayyim*, referred in note 25 above.

expelled from Spain, put forward one of the strongest formulations of the theory of the enchanted chain. In his *Minḥat Yehudah*, a commentary on the anonymous classic of kabbalistic literature *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohit* composed in Mantua, he wrote:

Man makes a strong impression [*roshem*] on high by each and every step that he takes here below either by a good or a bad deed. This happens because he is created from the supernal entities in the image of God, and this image connects him with his God like an iron chain which descends from above downward since when the lowest rung is moved here below, also the highest among them will be moved. And the commandments [stem] from the ten *sefirot* and when someone performs a commandment below it is as though he causes the emanation of power on the supernal form on high by means of the pipes of thought [*śinorot ha-mahashavah*, namely the *sefirah* of *Keter*], onto that attribute [namely *sefirah*] that points to that commandment, and then the supernal entities will be blessed because of the lower ones.²⁸

The formal correspondence between the two images makes it possible to influence the higher by the lower. Ritual is expressly understood as the dynamic aspect of the relationship between the lower and the higher: the image shows the effect from higher to lower but the action is from the lower to the higher [entities]. This action may be related to the reference to the iron chain, since immediately before this passage the influence of the iron-stone on iron is mentioned in order to illustrate the possibility of creating movement in an object located at a distance. An influential sixteenth-century kabbalist, R. Meir ibn Gabbai, used the phrase *shalshelet ha-yihud*, the chain of divine unity, as identical to the 'secret of the emanation' in the context of a discussion of the commandments which 'open the well and draw down the influx'.²⁹

In Safed, the circle of R. Moses Cordovero manifested a predilection for this type of *imaginaire*, as the writings of Cordovero himself and those of da Vidas,

²⁸ *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohit*, fols. 161b-162a. On the theurgical discussions of Hayyat see Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, pp. 341-345, and 350-352 for a French translation and analysis of this passage. See also the quote from Hayyat, adduced in R. Isaiah Horowitz, *ha-Shelah*, I, fol. 46b, and then quoted also in *Imrei Ṣaddiqim*, a collection of traditions by the nineteenth century R. Meir Bernstein of Radom, Warsaw 1896, fol. 15d.

²⁹ See R. Meir ibn Gabbai, 'Avodat ha-Qodesh, I:20, fol. 20ab. See also the locution *shalshelet ha-'ahdut*, found in the interesting kabbalistic text *Megillat 'Emmet ve-'Emunah*, published by Elliot R. Wolfson, in his 'Contemplative Visualization and Mystical Unknowing', *Kabbalah* 5 (2005), p. 108.

Abraham Galante,³⁰ and then R. Sabbatai Sheftel Horowitz, R. Isaiah Horowitz, and R. Abraham Azulai show. Cordovero's attempt to build continuous schemes of all of reality has already been highlighted³¹; in some cases Cordovero and his followers combined the theory of the chain of being with religious issues like Torah and prayer. Nevertheless he also wrote elaborate arguments in which the ontological topic stands alone and is not directly related to any specific ritualistic issues.³² After Cordovero the term *hishtalshelut* – though not *shalshelet* – seldom occurs in Lurianic writings, for instance in 'Es Hayyim. However, given the combined impact of the Cordoverian and Lurianic sources, the term *hishtalshelut* was found in Hasidic literature from its inception.

However, in the vast majority of the cases in which kabbalists resorted to the *imaginaire* of the chain, theosophical theory is involved, as the names of the authors mentioned above clearly shows. The early phases of ecstatic Kabbalah, represented by R. Abraham Abulafia and R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥarar, indicate little interest in this image. Nevertheless, the theosophical-theurgical kabbalists were absorbed in a much more dynamic and hypostatic theosophy, a way of thinking that contrasted sharply with the Neoplatonist comprehensive vision of reality that stressed concepts such as continuity, mediation, gradation, concatenation and plenitude. The Neoplatonic and the theosophical-theurgical magical schools were often merged despite the conspicuous discrepancies between them. Bear in mind that the different conceptual sources which nourish a certain discourse may impede attempts at reconciling diverging attitudes. The seminal theory of unification of divine powers, male and female, which plays such a central role in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, is much less an attempt to repair a broken chain, though it may also have had such a connotation, than primarily an effort to promote a sexual relationship that would recreate the plenitude of the divine anthropomorphic structure on high. Unlike the non-personalized, relatively neutral links in a chain, in most of the

³⁰ See, e.g., *Qirat Setarim*, fols. 43a, 49b, 58b

³¹ See Ben-Shlomo, *The Mystical Theology*, pp. 44, 159, 283–286. See also Cordovero's *'Or Ya'ar*, vol. 12, p. 137, vol. 8, p. 26. For the connection between the soul and the 'cord of emanation' and the ascent of the impact by this cord, *hevel*, see ibidem, vol. 13, p. 23. For the important locution *shalshelet ha-hamshakhah* see Cordovero, ibidem, vol. 8, p. 22. For a possible reverberation of Cordovero see also R. Isaskhar Be'er ben Petahiyahu Moše, *Pithei Yah*, Prag, 1609, fol. 4b.

³² For Torah see *'Elimah Rabbati*, fols. 22ab, 114d and his *Tefillah le-Moshe*, fol. 6a. For prayer and cosmic chain according to Cordovero see below ch. 4. See also R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Liqutei Torah*, IV, fol. 12ab.

sefirotic theosophies the divine powers possess special qualities which are quintessential for their role in the inner divine drama. They are organized into structures which involve relations of opposition, separation, synthesis and harmonization. This much more mythical sort of structure nevertheless incorporates the concept of the cord since it needs a concept which integrates man into a more continuous picture of the universe. While the theosophical structures developed theories of isomorphic correspondences and interaction, which I call theurgy, the vertical visions of the chain imagery dwelled primarily on mystical ascent and magical influences.

In theosophical discussions on the ten *sefirot*, there is another prime example of the way in which the tension between the two major models described by Lovejoy – divine fecundity and plenitude on the one hand, and divine perfection and transcendence on the other – are resolved within a complex divinity. As pointed out by Ewert H. Cousins, the dynamic vision of the Trinity, according to its Greek model, assumes a fecundity that is realized within the divine realm.³³ This is also the case in the sefirotic structure which combines the imagery of the chain with that of a theogony that incorporates strong organic images including the inner divine procreation.

The vision of the ten *sefirot* as a chain is linear in perspective. Each of the links is connected to another either explicitly, as in several passages in de León and Gikatilla, but also implicitly in other cases. This uni-linear vision corresponds to some of the Neo-Platonic processes of descent by emanation, and scholars who have mentioned the theory of the chain in Jewish thought refer in fact to its Plotinian version. In sefirotic terms, this uni-linear picture assumes that each *sefira* was emanated by the one above it, and is only related to it, and the last of the *sefirot*, *Malkhut*, is the sole divine power which governs the extra-divine world. This power alone is conceived of as mediating the variety of qualities found in the sefirotic realm to the lower worlds.

However, another influential theory dealing with chains of being was equally influential on many kabbalists. According to Proclus' multi-linear theory, there are several chains of being, or *seira*, each starting from one of the divine powers which constitutes the category of *henads* and continues with an intra-cosmic god, a corresponding celestial sphere and the creatures below that are linked to

³³ See 'Fecundity and the Trinity: An Appendix to Chapter Three of the Great Chain of Being', in Kuntz, *Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 73-82

them.³⁴ In the vast majority of the drawings of the ten *sefirot*, as well as in the thousands of their verbal descriptions, the descending emanation is made up of a series of three triads, some of them reminiscent again of the Neo-Platonic, and especially the Proclean triads. According to most theosophical books, each of the ten components of the sefirotic realm is the source of types of emanation, each of which reflects its specific source on high – a theory more akin to Proclus than Plotinus. The *sefirot* can be understood as *henads*, or *ousiarchs*. Moreover, according to some theosophical positions, especially R. Joseph Gikatilla in his *Sha'arei 'Orah*, there are three main lines in the sefirotic realm: mercy constituted by the *sefirot* on the right side, the central *sefirot* which constitute the median line, and the *sefirot* on the left side, which constitute the line of judgment. This warrants inquiry into the combined influence of Neo-Platonic views of the chain on theosophical Kabbalah. In some cases closer to Plotinus, there is one single uninterrupted line linking the Infinite and the lower *sefirot* among the creatures. Elsewhere, each *sefirah* has special features which define the specific nature of the emanations that stem from it.

Beyond the triadic views of the *sefirot* which became the standard vision of the ten *sefirot*, there is a strong anthropomorphic imagery on the one hand, and an imagery of the *sefirot* as a tree on the other. Thus the basically metaphysical Neo-Platonic structures were adopted by theosophical kabbalists to sets of totally different types of images which remained crucial and influential long after the adoption of the Hellenistic ontologies. The fusion between the Neo-Platonic and Neo-Aristotelian ontological structures on the one hand, and the more archaic imageries as represented by the rich anthropomorphic and tree-like depictions on the other is an important chapter of Jewish medieval theosophy that still needs in-depth investigation. To these two main components, I suggest adding another crucial source: the projections of traditional values, which covers an understanding of supernal powers in terms

³⁴ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, tr. and commentary E. R. Dodds, Oxford 1963, second edition, p. 25, proposition 21, pp. 87-93, prop. 97-102, pp. 99-101, prop. 110-113; idem, *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, pp. XXII, XXIV, 150, 181, 203, 238, 263, 316-317, 446, 547; *Oracles Chaldaïques*, ed. and tr. Edouard des Places, Paris 1971, p. 114 and the bibliography included there as well as A.J. Festugière, *Hermetisme et mystique païenne*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1967, pp. 126-127; Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles. Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Leiden 1989, pp. 125, 214; Copenhaver, 'Hermes Trismegistus', pp. 82-83, 85-86, 88-89, 103-105, and the bibliography adduced in p. 96 note 23 as well as his *Hermetica*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 77-78, 237.

of the divine name, Oral and Written Torah, prayer and other traditional terms.

The syntheses of the archaic and the Neo-Platonic-Neo-Aristotelian types of imageries are not simple combinations of different images and concepts, since putting them together amounts to fusing different types of dynamics. The Neo-Platonic processes of *processio* and *reversio* have nothing to do with the theosophical visions of cutting the branches of the supernal trees, or separations between the female and the male divine powers, and the imperative to repair or unify the supernal world. The principle of a unified universe by means of emanational processes scarcely leaves room for dramatic ruptures and sexual reunions between divine hypostases, processes which permeate kabbalistic theosophy. This is why much caution should be exercised before defining theosophical discussions as unified discourse, and room should be allowed, at least heuristically, for diverging types of imagery before attempting to fuse them into one unified system by creating correspondences between components of the various types of imageries. At times fusing these different trends is not so far removed from a confused reading of diverging sorts of kabbalistic texts belonging to different schools, as though they were part of one comprehensive symbolic system.

In principle, the Plotinian cord imagery is not only linear and continuous, but also relatively homogenous even in the cases where rungs and degrees are mentioned. Relativity is important here: clearly there are significant differences between Plotinus' view of the cosmic soul and the cosmic intellect or between the cosmic soul and Nature. However, in all these three cases, not only a continuous hierarchical line is implied, but also non-personalized entities that differ dramatically from the kabbalistic archaic imagery which is reminiscent of some of the Manichaean and Gnostic theosophies and to a lesser extent the Proclean and Iamblichean views. The non-Neoplatonic theosophies are infused with mythical dramas which take place between anthropomorphic entities. Thus, the linearity is interrupted by the vicissitudes of the inner life of the complex system. On the other hand, linearity impedes the dynamics of mythical and ritualistic thought. These are the irresolvable tensions which kabbalistic theosophists nevertheless attempted to overcome. One such example can be found in R. Joseph of Hamadan who frequently used cord images in which the term *shalshelet* occurs. In most cases the chain stands for the structure of ten *sefirot* and is not extended to the infra-sefirotic realm. However, *shalshelet* is combined in two major cases with anthropomorphic terms: *shalshelet ha-ṣurah ha-qedoshah*, namely the 'chain of the Holy Form', the chain of the supernal anthropos. In other words, the chain takes on an anthropomorphic form.

However this chain is also called the chain of the image or likeness – *shalshelet ha-demut* – or, according to R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, the ‘enchainment of the divine faces’, *hishtalshelut ha-parṣufim*, again other expressions expressing the combination of the two domains of the theosophical *imaginaire*.

The different combinations of the three semantic reservoirs – the archaic, the neo-Platonic and the ritualistic – make for the special quality of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. The archaic anthropomorphic and tree imagery confer upon the system a complexity and dynamics which are essential to most of the kabbalistic theosophical systems. In fact, the history of the fluctuations between the centrality of the Neo-Platonic and the archaic components shows an interesting swing in the pendulum: in the major classics of Kabbalah – the book of the *Zohar* and in Lurianic Kabbalah – the dominant mode is definitely archaic, and becomes clearer in the later corpus than in the earlier one. Especially prominent is the concept of *'Adam Qadmon*, the cosmic anthropos who permeates reality as a whole in the main version of Lurianic Kabbalah. This does not mean that there are no important Neo-Platonic ingredients, but interestingly enough, I am not acquainted with preponderant images of the chain in these two main corpora. When the chain concept does appear, it is related to ritualistic positions in archaic images which are imposed on the chain-imagery. On the other hand, in the literary corpus in which the image of chain and the concept of continuity are strong, such as in the voluminous writings of R. Moses Cordovero and his followers, the archaic symbolism is less accentuated, and the most obvious vector of activity directed toward the ontic chain is a magical one. The image of the ladder, an ontological interpretation of Jacob's ladder which is primarily dependent on Neo-Platonic sources, is a recurrent image in Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah. In some cases, the ladder is mentioned as a means of ascension whereas the chain stands for the cresent.³⁵

³⁵ See Alexander Altmann, 'The Ladder of Ascension - The Reverberations of a Medieval Motif in the Renaissance', *Von der Mittelalterlichen zur Modernen Aufklarung: Studien zur Juedischen Geistesgeschichte*, Tübingen 1987, pp. 34-59; M. Idel, 'The Ladder of Ascension; the Reverberations of a Medieval Motif in the Renaissance', ed. I. Twersky, *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, pp. 83-93; Cordovero, *Shi'ur Qomah*, fol. 32a; da Vidas, *Reshit Hokhmah*, Gate of Love, ch. 3 p. 397. For the image of ladder in the context of the great chain of being ir Ramon Lull see Lina L. Cofresi, 'Hierarchical Thought in the Spanish Middle Ages: Ramon Lull and Don Juan Manuel', in Kuntz, *Jacob's Tree*, pp. 153-156. I hope to deal wth the possible Arabic source of Ramon Lull's view of the ladder

Another important continuum is that of light, which stems from a divinity envisioned as light that descends onto the mystic. (See Chapter 3 for other forms of continua such as the one that depicts the lower realms as the impression of the higher realms, or the continuum of faces, found in Ḥasidei Ashkenaz). The more metaphysically developed continua can be described as descending chains. They represent emanative processes; in other words, extensions of the divine essence beyond its initial nature. These continua emerged before humanity and in their philosophical versions, the first two do not depend on human activity. In their different forms, the very existence of a theory of the extension downward invites an ascent that will restore some form of the broken unity. Lastly, there are emanation continua related to cosmic intellect, cosmic soul or the complex divinity of the theosophical Here, some kabbalists closely parallel Lovejoy's well-known theory of the Great Chain of Being.³⁶ A more detailed analysis of the linguistic continua helps shed light on additional and neglected forms of the complex of ideas designated as the Great Chain of Being. Medieval versions of the Great Chain of Being are crucially important as the framework for more experiential rather than mere ontological structures, as Bernard McGinn points out.³⁷

3. LINGUISTIC CONTINUA: REMARKS ON THE JEWISH MEDIEVAL IMAGINAIRE

The cord imagery in Jewish mysticism intersects in key ways with techniques and rituals. The ancient biblical and rabbinic continua were reinterpreted in the

elsewhere. For the issue of ladder in kabbalistic and Renaissance Jewish and Christian sources see Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism*, ch. 5.

³⁶ See *The Great Chain of Being*; Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. Williard R. Trask, Bollingen Series XXXVI, Princeton 1990, pp. 110, 119; the articles collected in Kuntz, *Jacob's Ladder*, and the extensive bibliography compiled by the editors at the end of the collection. For Judaism see David Blumenthal, 'Lovejoy's Great Chain of Being and the Jewish Tradition', *Niv Hamidrashia* 1980, pp. 80-91 reprinted in Kuntz, *Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 179-190; idem, 'On the Theories of 'Ibda' and Ta'thir', *Die Welt des Islam*, 20:3-4 (1980), pp. 162ff; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 5, 189-190; idem, *Hasidism*, *passim*; the important study by Elqayam, 'Eres ha-Sevi', pp. 153-164 who deals mostly with the concept of the chain of souls in Jewish mystical sources and its sources in Sufism, and numerous references to this topic in Sack, *The Guardian of the Pardes*, especially pp. 32-34, p. 55 note 35, pp. 113-120, 139, 139. I shall refer to their studies in the following discussion and footnotes.

³⁷ See *The Golden Chain*, pp. 61-102.

Middle Ages through new types of continua, as we saw above. The mythical angels became separate intellects, the sefirot were superimposed upon the angelic order, and sometimes these two orders overlapped as in the case of Metatron, who was conceived of as both an angel and a *sefiroth*. The sefirotic realm is described anthropomorphically on the one hand, and by linguistic elements in many other cases. In a few cases the Agent Intellect is described as the primordial speech.

This search for a continuum is visible as well in another major type of terminology that reflects the presence of the divine into the world, the 'mythical linguistic', a phrase reminiscent of the 'mystical philology' coined by Charles Zika to describe Johann Reuchlin's view of language.³⁸ This ontological vision of language was well-known in Jewish mysticism long before Safed Kabbalah.³⁹ In fact, the Ashkenazi figures in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were more attracted by the magical aspects of language whereas the Sefardi mystics, though deeply immersed in an ontological-theosophical attitude towards the Hebrew language and each of its components, were less inclined to emphasize the practical aspects of their mythical linguistics. It is interesting to note that the ontology of language which was articulated and elaborated in Sefardi Kabbalah and especially by Cordovero, was adopted and expanded upon by pre-modern Ashkenazi authors, especially the Hasidic writers. It was their fascination with language that explains the Ashkenazi turn to the Sefardi theories on linguistic immanence, and the numerous debates, some of which are discussed later. Whereas the theosophical kabbalists used language in general and its components and processes as part of their attempts to understand and explain the characteristic structures and processes of their theosophical

³⁸ See his 'Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico* and the Magic Debate of the Late Fifteenth Century', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 39 (1976), pp. 104-138 and Brian Vickers, 'Analogy versus identity; the rejection of occult symbolism, 1580-1680', *Occult & Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, Cambridge 1986, p. 106. See also David Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science, The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician*, Cambridge, Mass., London 1988, p. 69.

³⁹ See Scholem, 'The Name of God', Idel, 'Reification of Language'; idem, *Golem*, pp. 264-265, idem, 'Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance', ed. Lenn Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, Albany 1993, pp. pp. 326-327, 330; idem, 'Infinities of the Torah', pp. 143-144, and Wolfson, 'Letter Symbolism and Merkavah Imagery in the Zohar', *Alei Shefer - Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexandre Safran*, edited by M. Hallamish, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 195-236. [Hebrew].

systems, its attenuation in Hasidic thought left language with a greater role in the general economy of their mystical thought.

Several theosophical kabbalists used terminologies stemming from linguistic processes to describe theosophical forms of emanations.⁴⁰ However, while these kabbalists were more concerned with intra-divine processes, there are many examples of perspectives that link all levels of reality linguistically, in what can be called a *linguo-theology*. One of the earliest of these is found in the writings of two important late thirteenth-century kabbalists, R. Abraham Abulafia and his disciple R. Joseph Gikatilla. According to Abulafia, the Agent Intellect is the primordial speech, the source of the speech that constitutes the prime-matter of the revelation.⁴¹ According to several of his texts,⁴² this separate intellect is the source of all knowledge in the world, and human knowledge as well, but it is depicted at the same time as the source of the seventy languages, *shiv'im leshonot*, a phrase which is identical according to *gematria* calculations to the concept of the combination of letters: *seruf'otiyot*, since both Hebrew phrases total the number 1214.⁴³ Moreover, again using the *gematria*, Abulafia calculates that the Agent Intellect, in Hebrew *Sekhel ha-Po'el*, is numerically identical to the noun *Yisra'el*, since both phrases equal 541. The noun *Yisra'el* is interpreted as being composed of *YeSh*, [310] ('there are') and *Ra'l*, the 231 combinations of two letters presented in the *Sefer Yesirah*.⁴⁴ Thus the source of the forms in this world is identical to all the combinations of two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In Abulafia's mystical system, the combinations of letters are a major component in attaining mystical experience which is tantamount in many instances to union with the Agent Intellect. The lower linguistic activity unifies the human and the supernal spiritual which is conceived of in linguistic terms. The notion of primordial speech is also found in the eighteenth century Hasidic master R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl's, *Sefer Me'or Einayim* perhaps under the influence of Abulafia's Kabbalah, as we shall see below.⁴⁵

Abulafia's concept of *dibbur qadmon* benefits from comparison with the

⁴⁰ Scholem, 'The Name of God', pp. 166-194; Mopsik, 'Pensée, Voix et Parole'.

⁴¹ See Abraham Abulafia, *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, p. 16.

⁴² See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 108, 142-143.

⁴³ See Scholem, 'The Name of God', pp. 187-192; Idel, ibidem, pp. 8-11, 38-41, 108-109.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 125a. See also Scholem, 'The Name of God', pp. 187-188. See also below chapter 3, section 4 and below, note 71.

⁴⁵ Chapter 3, section 3.

Hindu notion of *paravac*, the supreme speech.⁴⁶ Like in Abulafia, this supreme speech is both an immanent and transcendent principle.⁴⁷ *Paravac*, though representing the origin of the lower forms of speech, is also identical to supreme or active consciousness, like the Agent intellect.⁴⁸ These may be more than phenomenological resemblances, since Abulafia was apparently influenced by topics found in Hindu mysticism.⁴⁹ Historical or not, the affinities between systems which emphasize the centrality of language from a cosmological and cosmogonical point of view deserve more detailed analysis that can be presented here.⁵⁰ According to one of R. Joseph Gikatilla's early treatises, 'the motion of this world corresponds to the motions of the letters, which point to this [motion] the paths of the guidance of the world and the paths of the action, how they all descend according to the chain of computation'⁵¹⁵² The passage is based upon a play on words: in Hebrew the term *tenu'ah* which occurs in the text several times means both motion and vowel. Thus the motions in the world correspond to the vocalizations of the consonants. What is less clear is the use of the term chain, which is related to cosmic reality.

Another kabbalist with strong affinities with ecstatic Kabbalah, R. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, also saw language as a form of divine immanence and refers to a sefirotic chain. In his book dealing with autobiographical and mystical experiences entitled '*Oşar Hayyim*' he writes in a fine example of linguo-theology that:

The holy language comes into the souls of the mystics of Israel from the radiance of the glory of the *Shekhinah*. And before the generation of the Tower of Babel, there was only the holy language, as it is said: 'And all the earth was [speaking] one language and the same words'.⁵³ And understand that 'language' is the secret of *Shekhinah*, and 'words' allude to the divine name formed of 72 [units] whose letters are 216.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ See Padoux, *Vac*, pp. 166-167, 172-188.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, pp. 168, 173-174.

⁴⁸ See ibidem, pp. 174-175.

⁴⁹ Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 14, 24, 25, 39.

⁵⁰ See Idel *Powers of Language*.

⁵¹ *Shalshalet ha-heshbon*. Interestingly enough, the term chain does not occur in Abraham Abulafia's writings, though he was the teacher of the young Gikatilla.

⁵² See *Girkat 'Egoz*, Hanau 1615, fol. 46b.

⁵³ Genesis 11:1.

⁵⁴ Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 79a. See also ibidem, fol. 128b, 200b.

The secret hinted at in this text is the numerical equivalence of the word 'language', (*safah*), with *Shekhinah*; both have a numerical value of 385, a computation mentioned as early as Hasidei Ashkenaz and elsewhere.⁵⁵ Thus, the linguistic material of the Hebrew language is tantamount to forms flowing from the radiance of the divine presence within this world. Here the luminous cord is combined with a vision of Hebrew as constituting a linguistic emanation from above. Speaking Hebrew is, accordingly, the corporeal articulation of the divine outpouring. Less a creation of the human vocal organs, the Hebrew language emanates from the divine sphere. Apparently R. Isaac had in mind a rabbinic dictum whose sources are rather obscure, that states that the '*Shekhinah* speaks from the throat of Moses'.⁵⁶ This view differs from the more common understanding of Hebrew as divine because of its origin, namely as a creation of God. It is divine because it flows from the divine realm into the mystic and speaking this language could also be interpreted as experiencing the presence of the divine. This is an attempt to ontologize language by comparing and even identifying it to the Neo-Platonic emanation that descends upon the mundane realm. However, though R. Isaac discusses language in general, he also mentions the so-called name of 72 letters as related to the immanence of the divine presence. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, this name served as a major component of the ecstatic kabbalists' techniques to attain the divine realm or influx. Thus, the mode of divine immanence is also the mode in which the human returns to a higher divine plane. In fact, Jewish Neo-Platonic thinkers such as R. Solomon ibn Gabirol and Isaac ibn Latif and some theosophical kabbalists, like R. Jacob ben Sheshet had compared the emanative process to the production of speech.⁵⁷ However, for them this comparison was apparently only a simile, whereas for R. Isaac of Acre the metaphor was used to define language as an outpouring descending on the souls of the mystics of Israel.

From the mid-sixteenth century onward, this linguistic vision of reality

⁵⁵ See Abrams, "Sod kol ha-Sodot", p. 78, from R. Eleazar of Worms' *Hilkhot ha-Kavod*; Cordovero, *Tefillah le-Moshe*, fol. 65a. See also R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov, *Mayyim 'Adirim*, Jerusalem 1987, p. 287. For more on his linguo-theosophy see ibidem, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁶ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 84, 149 notes 49, 50, and below chapter 4, section 5.

⁵⁷ See S.O. Heller-Wilensky, 'R. Isaac ibn Latif: Kabbalist or Philosopher?' in ed. A. Altmann, *Jewish Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Period*, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, pp. 208-209 and the numerous sources referred to in the footnotes.

became much more pronounced. In his *'Elimah Rabbati* R. Moses Cordovero presents a very complex mystical and mythical interpretation of the organs of speech, in a detailed way unparalleled by any prior kabbalist.⁵⁸ Expanding upon the rather simple phonetic theory of *Sefer Yeširah* and upon the Zoharic anthropomorphic views regarding the divine heads, he regards the five places in the mouth where speech is produced as the sources of the *sefirot* and ‘the secret of the chain of emanation’ of all reality; the letters are conceived of as tools, instruments or vessels of the ‘divine will’ as well as the ‘secret of the supernal spiritual force’ because the latter is drawn forth through them. Although the chain (*shalshelet*) as a metaphor for the emanational structure occurs frequently in kabbalistic literature, the following use of this metaphor is unusual: the emanational chain is not only the path of descent of divine power, but also the mode of ascent of human influence:

Each and every letter has a [corresponding] spiritual form and a noble luminary, emanated from the essence of the *sefirah*, emanated [*mishtalshel*] one degree after another, just like the path of the [descending] emanation of the *sefirot* [*hishtalshelut ha-sefirot*] [...] and behold, the letter is a palace and substratum to that spirituality. And when someone recites and moves one of the letters, by necessity that spirituality will arise and from the vapor of mouth sacred letters emerge and are elevated and are bound to their source, which is the root of emanation.⁵⁹

The very source of emanation is therefore a process of uttering sounds and the whole process of emanation is explained in linguistic terms – an important and influential instance of linguo-theology/theosophy.⁶⁰ This view had profound repercussions on his circle; R. Elijah da Vidas, one of Cordovero’s disciples, wrote that:

Out of His love for man, God fixed these letters in the mouth of man, in order to enable him to cleave to his Creator; by the very pronunciation of the sounds

⁵⁸ Fols. 130c-133b.

⁵⁹ R. Moses Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 27, ch. 2; II, fol. 59c; R. Shmuel Gallico’s *'Assis Rimmonim*, fol. 69a. It influenced Vital’s *Sha'arei Qedushah*, p. 105; R. Abraham Azulai’s *Hesed le-'Avraham*, fols. 9d-10a, 13d-14a. More on related issues see below chapter 4, section 4. On the concept of the ‘chain of love’ in Cordovero which occurs in *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 4, ch. 6: I, fol. 19d, and its Neoplatonic sources I hope to elaborate elsewhere. See meanwhile below ch. 4, note 127.

⁶⁰ See *'Elimah Rabbati*, fols. 132d-133b. Compare also to the view of *Keter* as supernal mouth in *Tomer Devorah*, ch. II.

here below, when he studies Torah or prays, he shakes and stirs up the roots above. The meaning of the verb 'fixed' is similar to sticking the end of a chain in one place, and the other end in another place; the distance between the places notwithstanding, when a man shakes the end of the chain which is in his hand, he shakes the whole chain [...] and so we can understand the virtue of our ancestors whose prayers were answered immediately, since they were careful not to defile the twenty-two letters that are [pronounced by] the five places in the mouth.⁶¹

I was unable to locate the exact work by Cordovero quoted by da Vidas but it is obviously an authentic piece of Cordoverian Kabbalah, although some elements in the paragraph could plausibly have come from R. Yehudah Hayyat's book as well.⁶² It is highly interesting that Cordovero interprets Abulafia's technique of the pronunciation of Divine Names in his own terms; the utterance is tantamount to the *kavvanah* of prayer.⁶³ As we shall see in more detail below, this linguistic continuum is paralleled in the writings of Cordovero and his followers by an emphasis on the efficacy of vocal rituals.⁶⁴

This 'cord-like' linguistic image also affected pre-Hasidic, Hasidic and Mitnaggedic views of language.⁶⁵ One particularly salient feature is the

⁶¹ R. Elijah da Vidas, *Reshit Ḥokhmah*, Gate of Holiness, ch. 10; II, p. 247. See also Cordovero, *Shi'ur Qomah*, fol. 94ac, part of which will be quoted at the end of this chapter. Da Vidas' text was copied verbatim in an influential ethical-kabbalistic compedium by R. Isaia Horovitz, *Shnei Luhot ha-Berit*, I, fol. 112b and in Nathan of Gaza's *Derush ha-Menorah*, who gave to the chain motif a peculiar turn; see Gershon Scholem, ed. *Be-'Iqevot Mashiah* Jerusalem 1944, p. 106, and more recently see Elqayam, 'Eres ha-Ševi', pp. 161-162. For the Plotinian vision of chain of the soul in this kabbalist see above in this chapter. On Pseudo-Dionysius' use of the figure of cable in connection to prayer and the differences between his viewpoint and da Vidas' see below chapter 4, section 6. See also Sack, *The Guardian of the Pardes*, pp. 183, 186, 189.

⁶² See e. g. Cordovero's *'Elimah Rabbati*, fol. 132d. The cleaving to the spiritual force inherent within a form in this world is also Cordoverian: see his *'Or Yaqr*, Jerusalem 1979, vol. 10, p. 7.

⁶³ ibidem, vol. 12, p. 147.

⁶⁴ See chapter 4, section 4. Cordovero's former student, R. Hayyim Vital, juxtaposed prayers and pronunciation of names, though he refers to the angelic powers that are invoked; see *Sha'arei Qedushah*, p. 106

⁶⁵ See, e.g., R. Jacob Kopel of Miedzyrec, *Qol Ya'aqov*, Lemberg 1859, fol. 1a; R. Barukh of Kossov, 'Amud ha-'Avodah, fols. 46d-47b where the phrase *hevel ha-hishtalshelut* occurs in a context dealing with language; R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *'Or ha-Meir*, fol. 115a, R. Dov Baer of Lubavitch, in the text translated by Louis Jacobs, *On Ecstasy, A Tract by Dohb Baer of Lubavitch* Rossel Books, New York 1963, p. 102 and

occurrence of the interesting phrase *hevel ha-hamshakhah*, 'the cord of the drawing down', coined in one of the most widespread Hasidic writings, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady's famous book *Tanya*.⁶⁶

There is another immanentist expression that served as a framework for both the mystical and the magical concepts of the use of language. The same R. Shneur Zalman of Liady writes in his *Sha'ar ha-Yihud va-ha-'Emunah* in the name of the Besht,⁶⁷ that letters, sounds and words were the creative force of a certain entity, the firmament in the case discussed there:

[...] stands upright forever within the firmament of the heaven and is clothed within all the firmaments forever, in order to enliven them [...] because should the letters disappear for a second, God forefend, and return to their source [then] all the heavens would become naught and nil indeed and become as if they never existed at all [...] And this is also [the case for] all the creatures that are in all the worlds, higher and lower, even this corporeal earth, and even the mineral, would the letters of the ten logoi⁶⁸ disappear from it [the earth] for a second, God forefend, by means of which the earth was created [...] it would return to naught and nil indeed [...] and the combination of letters that form the name 'even [stone]' is the vitality of the stone, and this is the case of all the creatures in the world, their names in the Holy language are the letters of the speech that are emanated from one gradation to another from the ten logoi in the Torah, by their substitutions and permutations of letters according to the 231 gates, until they arrive and are clothed within that creature.⁶⁹

note 2; R. Meshulam Phoebus of Zbarazh's *Yosher Divrei 'Emmet*, printed together with *Liqutei Yegarirz*, Jerusalem 1981, fol. 132a, as well as R. Israel of Kuznitz' *'Avodat Israel*, Munkacz 1928, fol. 77bc, R. Israel of Ryzhin, *'Irin Qaddishin Tanyana*, Barfeld, 1887, fol. 8c, and R. Naftali of Ropshitz, *'Ayalah Sheluhah*, Budapest 1943, fol. 18b; R. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, p. 13.

⁶⁶ See *Iggeret ha-Teshuvah*, ch. 5, fol. 95b; idem, *Torah 'Or*, Brooklyn 1985, fol. 64b; idem, *Liqutei Torah*, part IV, Song of Songs, Brooklyn 1979, fols. 12ab, 42b. Compare also to his son's, R. Dubber, *Beurei ha-Zohar*, Brooklyn 1955, fol. 44d and in many other instances in his other writings.

⁶⁷ The core of the view can already be found in *Shoher Tov*, a Midrash on the Psalms, and recent Hasidic writers had to provide a pretext for adding this view in the name of the Besht. See the special issue of *Sefer Tanya*, Brooklyn 1989, pp. 52-55.

⁶⁸ *Ma'anat*. According to rabbinic sources, in the first chapter of Genesis there are ten creative speeches. For the sources and reverberations of this view in Jewish mysticism see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 114ff.

⁶⁹ See *Sefer Tanya*, ibidem, fols. 76b-77a and the addition to *Keter Shem Tov*, fol. 84b. See also the quotes in the name of the Besht in *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 7a and in

This well-known text is important because it shows that immanentist linguistics was attributed to the founder of Hasidism.⁷⁰ It assumes that every creature created by the ten creative logoi and mentioned in the first chapter of Genesis is maintained by the letters of the words that were pronounced in *illud tempus*. However, all the other creatures, although not mentioned there, like the stone for example, can subsist only by the dint of the different derivations of the letters that constitute the ten logoi. Interestingly enough, following some kabbalistic speculations from the school of R. Israel Saruq and ultimately from *Sefer Yeširah* and some of its commentaries, the above text mentions the 231 combinations of letters. These creative combinations represent the descending linguistic cord. However, there are several kabbalistic techniques which use the same combinations of letters in order to attain a mystical experience.⁷¹ R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev, the contemporary of R. Shneur Zalman claims likewise that 'the existence of all the different existing entities are the letters of the name of each and every entity, because the letters are emanated from the aspect of the supernal speech'.⁷² Just as the forms of Aristotelianism in the Middle Ages emanated from the supernal Agent Intellect, and constitute, together with matter, the substance, the name formed out of specific letters descends upon the lower material realm and sustains the created entities.⁷³ Similar to Abraham Abulafia's interpretation of the continuum between the Agent Intellect and human intellect in terms of language⁷⁴ likewise the Hasidic master uses the phrase 'supernal speech' as the source of letters that will enter the mundane world and constitute its spiritual features.

R. Israel of Kuznitz, *Sherit Yisrael*, Lublin 1895, fol. 66a, *Ba'al Shem Tov*, I, p. 17. A part of the quote occurs in *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 66 and 'Or ha-'Emmet', fol. 11a, but the name of the Besht is not mentioned.

⁷⁰ For another important quote in the name of the Besht to the same effect see the somewhat later book by R. Ḥayyim Turer of Chernovitz, *Be'er Mayyim Ḥayyim*, I, fol. 8d. See also the reiteration of this theme in R. Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, fols. 26d-27b.

⁷¹ See e.g. Abraham Abulafia's claim that 'The God of Israel, means, secretly, *YeSh Ra'eL* gates, and it was taught that this name is attributed to our nation because of our knowledge of the divine (name)or of God who created ex nihilo, *yesh me-'ayin* by means of the two hundreds and thirty one gates, whom He combined in His wisdom'. 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz', Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 159b. Compare also the quote from R. Joseph ibn Ṣayyāḥ, cited in Idel, *Golem*, p. 151. See also note 44 above.

⁷² *Qedushat Levi*, fol. 63d. Compare also to the Rabbi of Gur, *Sefat 'Emet*, IV, fol. 1c.

⁷³ See also Idel, *Golem*, pp. 57, 111.

⁷⁴ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 83-86.

Linguistic terms were propelled upon the higher entities, and the emanational scheme was also described in linguistic terms. Whereas for Abraham Abulafia the material nature of linguistic processes at times created an ambiguous attitude, because of his emphasis upon the superiority of the intellectual over all forms of material reality, the Hasidic masters felt no embarrassment concerning this material aspect of language. As Scholem concludes, the word returns to God because it comes from God.⁷⁵

In the middle of the nineteenth century R. Isaac Yehudah Aiziq Safrin of Komarno declared that:

Everything depends upon the letters by means of which all the worlds are unified becoming one'.⁷⁶ They were conceived as including the 'inner spiritual force' and the vitality of the world. And each of these letters has a spiritual form, a sublime light descending from the very essence of the *sefirot*, coming down degree after degree until that light is clothed within the letter [actually sound] on his lips, and they have within them the supernal light.⁷⁷

Language, like the divine spark of the human soul, is one of the few things that ensures an unbroken link between the lower and the higher worlds. This cord is part of an enchanted universe, the backbone of which are the letters of the Hebrew language and their combinations. As seen in some cases above, the talismanic perspective generates the more magical aspect of linguistic activities. However, the immanentist view also provides an opportunity to reach back to the divine source, by liturgical and other linguistic forms of activity. Despite the obvious impact of the talismanic view of language upon Hasidic texts, the immanentist approach, which is as important as the talismanic, is based upon positions that have not been found in magical sources. The linguistic continuum expresses, from a certain point of view, a position that does not need the talismanic assumption. Whereas the talismanic aspect ensures the attraction of the higher within the lower, the immanentist nature of language ensures the return of man to his source.

As compared to classical, Aristotelian models of the nature of language, the Hasidic texts quoted above like most of the kabbalistic texts, argue strongly for a naturalistic theory that the correspondence between a word and a thing, or

⁷⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 17.

⁷⁶ *Nośer Hesed*, Jerusalem 1982, p. 110.

⁷⁷ Ibidem. See also the text quoted in the name of R. Israel of Ryzhin in *Ba'al Shem Tov*, I, pp. 17-18.

between a *signifiant* and its *signifié*, is not a matter of human convention or agreement. Rather, the created entity is an exteriorization of a linguistic core, a materiality whose essence is defined by the letters that dwell within it. The continuum from God to matter found in some philosophical positions in the Middle Ages, namely the concept of form that links God and any substance or object here below, was replaced by the supreme divine speech that generates the principle or the essence of every existing entity. The profound affinity between a specific name and its object permeates Hasidic thought. This fascination with the linguistic continuum is paralleled in Hasidism by a spiritual or vitalistic type of continuum, by the possibility of man to become naught or the capability of the righteous to draw down the divinity. Like many kabbalists before them, the Hasidic masters would fiercely combat the Aristotelian conventional theory of language. Even Abulafia, the most Aristotelian among the early kabbalists, rejected this view insofar as the Hebrew language is concerned in his discussion of the passage from Aristotle's *De Interpretationis* concerning language as conventional as understood by Averroes.⁷⁸ Abulafia's views on language were known to Renaissance thinkers through Flavius Mithridates' Latin translations of some of Abulafia's writings commissioned by Pico della Mirandola, and absorbed by Pico into his own writings.⁷⁹

According to a passage by the mid-nineteenth century Ukrainian R. Israel of Ryzhin, each soul has a specific letter in the Torah that draws and causes the emanation of vitality and illuminations to that soul. This is an interesting formulation of the concept of the divine sparks dominant in Lurianic Kabbalah, but couched here in linguistic terms.⁸⁰ To a certain extent, the reduction of the vitality of all creatures to different forms of language assumes a 'linguistic consanguinity of all things', to paraphrase Ernst Cassirer.⁸¹ Hasidism can be conceived as proposing a certain 'law of metamorphosis' from one thing to another via the various elements of immanent language, a notion formulated again by Cassirer to characterize primal thought. In Martin Buber's interesting assessment, expressed in the context of his view of Hasidism, 'primitive' man is

⁷⁸ See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 11-13 and the pertinent footnotes and Vickers, 'Analogy versus Identity', 101.

⁷⁹ See the important contribution by Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola*, where the presence of Abulafia's views in Pico's thought was convincingly highlighted alongside his emphasis on the magical transformation of Kabbalah in its versions presented by Mithridates and Pico.

⁸⁰ See 'Irin Qaddishin, fol. 39a; compare to fol. 49d.

⁸¹ See his *Essay on Man*, New York 1960, p. 108.

a ‘naïve pan-sacramentalist’.⁸² However, from our perspective, what counts is not only the linguistic nature of many forms of the kabbalistic and Hasidic versions of the Great Chain of Being, but also the fact that this chain operates in two opposite directions: downward, especially as an emanative system, and upward as a theurgical and magical device. As in the other forms of the chain of being, the linguistic chain confers a transcendental status upon human activity to map the supernal realm and enable the growth of the human individual who cleaves to it.

4. ASCENDING TECHNIQUES

Mystical systems may and often do operate under the assumption that the divine realm is both ontologically continuous yet open to human experience by either embracing immanentist views (pantheism or panentheism) or emanative theories which bridge the gap between the supernal and the lower realms. In immanentist systems, the main mode of mystical experience is connected to recognition of the divine substratum of reality, a removal of the veil, or an unmasking of the surface, an unconcealment which is not only a cognitive exercise but also a discovery of the nature of the ‘true self’. In transcendentalist systems, in addition to the descent of the divine, certain mystical systems include modes of ascent of what is considered to be the most important human capacity permeating the descending continua. Sometimes, this ascent means the end of a process of growth of a human power which flourished throughout an entire life, sometimes it is a matter of the purification and the return to its origin of an entity which arose from the supernal realm. Thus the ascending processes, facilitated by mystical techniques, combine a mystical goal, mystical union for example, and the paths to achieve it. The centrality of a given path can be emblematic of the importance of the mystical goal in a given mystical system.

Perhaps the main issue in understanding a mystical system is not so much the very existence of a certain expression or even set of expressions whose extreme mystical content scholars will agree upon (union, communion, or feeling of the divine presence), but how crucial it is to the overall structure, and the impact of what I call its ‘radiation’ upon other topics including the technique, and vice-versa. The Gestalt-contexture that includes such mystical expressions may confer greater weight upon their significance; in other words, there may be formulations where a certain coherence between the mystical aim

⁸² Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, pp. 167, 170-171.

and the technique to achieve it can be discerned.⁸³ My assumption is that each major religion can include several metaphysical structures, which may or may not incorporate mystical components. What seems to me to be problematic in the theological phenomenologies discussed in the Introduction is a generic attitude to complex types of religious literature which are conceived as embodying only one central type of spirituality. The essentialist approach is characteristic of the scholars mentioned, when referring to one religion or even when a certain phase in the history of a certain specific religion is dealt with. This is why the presence or absence of a certain central concept, phrase, or experience is so crucial to this type of academic approach. Instead of this descending scholarly approach which begins with theology as the most crucial issue for an experience that can occur to a mortal human, I suggest starting with what the mystic does before he attains a certain experience, and use it as the starting point to move upwards. The downward scholarly approaches are not exclusive; rather they are often combined, as we will see in the following chapters. The emergence of the metaphysical 'cords' is paralleled, as we shall see, by the intensification of the rituals, which amounts to envisaging technical performances as conducive to mystical experiences. I intend to propose an alternative to the theological orientation as regards the issue of mystical union. Namely, instead of deciding upon the nature of a certain unitive experience from its theoretical-theological starting point, I would prefer emphasizing the more experiential components of the mystical event. Rather than stressing the nature of the object of the mystical union as part of a theological discourse, we should direct our attention to expressions related to the experience itself; i.e., to the mystical techniques of its attainment, to claims of efficacy, and its psychological and physiological features. By shifting the focus of scholarly concern from an overemphasis on the object of the experience to the type of experience itself, we can address this issue on the basis of the existing evidence, and a decisive change in the meaning of *unio mystica* may take place. Instead of dealing with theology in order to establish the content of a certain phrase, we direct our search toward expressions related to intensity, vibrancy, or those dealing with the fleeting or lasting impact of the mystical experience. Such a shift will highlight descriptions of experience whose object of union may not be the ultimate divinity, but are considered extreme mystical experiences

⁸³ On Gestalt-contextures see Aron Gurwitsch, 'Phenomenology of Perception: Perceptual Implications', *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, ed. James M. Edie, Chicago 1965, p. 21.

nonetheless. In this type of phenomenology of mystical expressions⁸⁴ it is less important if the Christian mystic describes his or her union with the Christ or with the Father, if the Sufi relates his experience of the *Hidr* and not of '*Allah*', or if a Jewish mystic intends to become one with a lower *sefirah* or even with the Agent Intellect and not with the Infinite. The quality and intensity of the experience as described by the mystic, and less the object of the union, may in my opinion be more crucial than the theological status of its content. The crucial questions are not whether there are expressions of mystical union in a certain type of mysticism, but rather when they appear, whether they are at the center or on the fringes of a specific tradition, or religious structure and finally, what is even more consonant with my methodological proposal, whether the concept of mystical union significantly interacts with other main concepts and practices and qualifies them, and is qualified by such interactions.

I will attempt to emphasize the extent of the coherence or the cohesiveness of a certain system that is, or is not, constituted by the mutual radiations among its components. radiations which facilitate the emergence of a specific syntax. Such an analysis will also be able to better determine whether the occurrence of a certain mystical formula is merely a matter of convention, sharing a vocabulary en vogue in a certain tradition without any experiential substratum, or whether even in the case of a repetition of a certain catch-phrase, there are good reasons to believe that it may reflect a deeper experience. For instance, the fact that Abraham Abulafia uses an existing formula does not detract from the experiential mode of his mysticism, which can be judged by inspecting his mystical path, his mystical techniques, for example, and his descriptions of mystical experiences themselves.⁸⁵ Thus by emphasizing the semantic links between religious ideals, corporeal techniques, the cord ontologies, and the mutual radiations between the goal and the path, our outlook is not so far removed from viewing the dependence of the experience of mystical union on a certain type or types of theology.

However, the notion of radiation or a Gestalt-contexture may involve a more flexible type of relationship between different notions. The centrality of the concept of *devequt* in a certain mystical system will be greater if this kind of experience is seen as necessary for the success of another major type of activity, namely the theurgical activity related to the fulfillment of the commandments

⁸⁴ Cf. Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 124-126, 130-134; idem, 'Universalization and Integration', pp. 49-50.

⁸⁵ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 10-11.

or prayer. The introduction of *devequt* as a prerequisite for mystical intention [*kavvanah*] during the observance of the commandments and/or their influence testifies to a new stage in the development of Jewish spirituality toward something which may be considered a more full-fledged mystical phenomenon. Or, to take another example, the probability that certain unitive phrases may stand for more than a repetition of a cliché, but may reflect an actual experience at least as understood by the mystic, is greater if the same mystic stresses the importance of some related concepts like *hishtawwut* [equanimity], *hitbodedut* [mental concentration], *serufei 'otiyot* [combinations of letters], union with the divine, or *hitpashetut ha-gashmiyyut*, the divestment of corporeality. If equanimity is to be understood as a certain discipline, as the older sources of this concept in Stoicism, Patristic literature and Sufism show, the three latter practices are part of a technique. Take for example a kabbalist's claim for such congruence. According one of the teachers of R. Isaac of Acre,

R. Abner told me that a man who was a lover of wisdom came to one of the practitioners of concentration, [*hitbodedut*] and asked to be received as one of them. They replied: 'My son, may you be blessed from heaven, for your intention is a good one. But please inform me, have you achieved equanimity [*hishtawwut*] or not'. He said to him: 'Master, explain your words'. He said to him: 'My son, if there are two people, one who honors you and one of whom despises you, are they the same in your eyes or not?' He replied: 'By the life of my soul, master, I derive pleasure and satisfaction from the one who honors me, and pain from the one who despises me, but I do not take vengeance or bear a grudge'. He said to him: 'My son, go in peace, for so long as you have not achieved equanimity, so that your soul feels the contempt done to you, you are not yet ready to link your thoughts on High, that you may come and concentrate. But go, and subdue your heart still more in truth, until you shall be composed, and then you may concentrate'. And the cause of his equanimity is the attachment of his thoughts to God and attachment of the thought to God causes man to feel neither the honor nor the contempt that people showed him.⁸⁶

Here the aspirant is told that in order to become a novice he must already be proficient in an aptitude I would designate as a discipline, the search for a state

⁸⁶ *Me'irat Einayim*, p. 218; Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 372 note 59, Gottlieb, *Studies*, pp. 236-239, Fenton, *Treatise*, p. 63 note 94; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 112-114.

of equanimity, which is the prerequisite for the technical stage. It consists in suppressing the importance of the ego so as to open the psyche to the spiritual dimensions of reality.

In the present context, it is important to emphasize the centrality of linguistic elements in many of the Jewish mystical techniques. As we will see, combinations of letters, divine names, the text of the Torah and the words of prayer played an important role in the mythical paths and are explicated by various kabbalistic schools, (see chapters 3-4). Rabbinic Judaism, and following it the variety of speculative literatures written by part of the Jewish elites in the Middle Ages and afterwards, shifted the center of religious praxis from the topocentric religiosity of the Bible in which the sacrifices played such an important role, to forms of religion in which observances related to language and texts took center stage. This shift in the nature of religious praxis was one of the most fundamental changes in Judaism, and the implications of this change can be seen in the mystical techniques and the theological stands that shaped the new religious ideals.

The place and role of the goal of a mystical system, whether mystical union or theurgical operations, cannot be defined solely on the basis of the recurrence of expressions related to mystical experiences. It should be possible come closer to the actual significance of extreme expressions of mystical union,⁸⁷ not only by examining the simple semantics of a phrase or an ideal but also by analyzing the more general structure of the text, or the syntax of its concepts, and, if possible, the various forms of religious behavior of the author or the group to which he belongs, to enhance our understanding of a certain system. The conjugation of an ascending technique with a religious ideal embedded in a hierarchical system, the *imaginaire* of the continua, creates a structure that is more coherent and understandable. The resonance between the speaking God of the Bible and the emphasis on speaking mystics of the post-biblical forms of Jewish mysticism prompted the emergence of linguistic continua, whose inner logic requires detailed investigation.

The linguistic continua, like the metaphysical ones discussed above, are basically impersonal extensions of the divine which provide the mystic with the possibility to touch the supernal world by stretching or expanding his spiritual capacities. Man, in order to become similar to the descending continua, must depersonalize himself or at least reduce his more variegated personality to the capacity that is congruent with the continuum, a move that is conspicuous in

⁸⁷ See e.g. ibidem, pp. 7-11.

the substantial role played by the concept of the divestment of corporeality in Jewish mysticism. This analysis and most of the developments in the following chapters are only weakly related to the supernal and human drama or theosophic complexities characteristic of archaic imageries. In fact, most of the above continua differ from other, more widespread continua, like the Christological ones in Christianity, or the various avatars of the Hindu Gods in India. In these cases, as in some forms of kabbalistic theosophies, a myth emerges which gravitates around a drama that is related to a more personalized hypostasis and prompts a more dramatic way of relating to these avatars. In the impersonal continua the *imitatio dei* is not so much a reiteration of the suffering of the savior as a substantial assimilation. Unlike the personal imitation, which has to do with a *via passionis*, the impersonal continua calls for modes of religious activities that can be described as a *via perfectionis*.⁸⁸

5. DESCENDING RITES

As mentioned above, the ascending vector may sometimes constitute a return to the source, the peak of a process of simplification to use a Plotinian term, which also implies an imitation of the divine spirituality by the human soul. Such a return may be regarded as the end of the mystical path and can culminate, according to some sources, in a sort of mystical death. In fact, the specter of death haunts extreme forms of mysticism as shown in certain ecstatic texts, such as those by R. Abraham Abulafia,⁸⁹ R. Isaac of Acre⁹⁰ and a handbook of ecstatic Kabbalah written at the beginning of the sixteenth century. R. Yehudah Albotini wrote in his *Sullam ha-'Aliyah* that those who do not want their soul to become detached during the mystical experience should, while conscious, before they pass from the human to the divine realm: ‘adjure their souls by a terrible oath or by the Great and Terrible Name, that during the appearance and the vision, when the soul is not in its own realm, it should not separate and go to cleave to its source, but should return to its sheath and body, as at the beginning’.⁹¹

This is obviously a linguistic technique, because the divine name is

⁸⁸ On these two paths in Jewish mysticism and messianism see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 34, 58, 116-119, 305.

⁸⁹ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 180, 208 note 18.

⁹⁰ idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 94.

⁹¹ *Sullam ha-'Aliyah*, p. 74. See also p. 69.

mentioned explicitly. In fact, this passage is a fine example of an exit rite, to use M. Mauss' terminology.⁹² It is worth comparing to a similar description from the early Hasidic masters found in R. Moses Eliaqum Beriy'ah, the son of R. Israel, the Maggid of Kuznitz. In his *Be'er Moshe*, he tells about a *şaddiq* who is only sated when he is:

actually annihilated by the strength of the union with God, blessed be He, by his dedication to God [...] as I have seen some of my teachers and masters [...] especially my teacher, the holy Rabbi, the man of God [...] R. Meshullam Zusha, who totally divested himself from this world when he ascended in order to cleave to God, to such an extent that he was actually close to annihilating his existence. Thus it was necessary that he should swear an oath and make donations so that his soul would remain in him.⁹³

The similarity between these two quotes is remarkable. However, it is not my purpose to show that they are historically related, despite the claims that Albotini's book was a source for a certain Hasidic concept.⁹⁴ Greater caution is required; from my point of view, the phenomenological affinity is much more important. The masters of R. Moshe Eliaqum Beriy'ah of Kuznitz were aware of the danger of expiring during a mystical experience and they used a certain device to survive, just as Albotini did three centuries earlier. Given the anomian nature of ecstatic Kabbalah, the commandments did not play a role in its mystical system and could not serve as exit-rites.⁹⁵ In fact in some other passages, this Hasidic master assumes that the extreme mystical experience can culminate in death, but this does not occur because God causes the soul to return to the body and supplies vitality to it.⁹⁶ Divine grace supplies human needs by emanating vitality; the mystic does not draw down sustenance after the impact of his annihilating experience has dissipated. As we learn in another passage: 'for the *şaddiq*, it is an easy thing to ascend on high'.⁹⁷ What is much

⁹² See Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, tr. R. Brain, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 1975, pp. 49-50, 100, 128.

⁹³ *Be'er Moshe*, rpr. Tel Aviv, N.D., fol. 8c. This story also appears in R. Nathan Netə' ha-Kohen of Kalbiel, *Sefer Boṣna' Qaddisha'*, rpr. Brooklyn 1984, fol. 12b.

⁹⁴ See Azriel Shohat, 'Ha-Şaddiq in the Hasidic Doctrine', *Yaacob Gil Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 302-303 (Hebrew).

⁹⁵ On nomian and anomian techniques see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. XVI-XVIII; idem, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 113-117.

⁹⁶ See, in particular, his *Be'er Moshe*, fols. 9b, 85c.

⁹⁷ ibidem, fol. 127c.

more difficult according to this master is to come down in peace.⁹⁸ Again, divine grace enables the *saddiq* to descend with all the influx endowed upon him. Nevertheless, both passages state that the oath that precedes entry into the ecstatic experience is necessary to ensure the return of the soul to this world. This oath is, once again, a linguistic device.

An extremely interesting example of the relationship between the commandments and the return from intense cleaving to God is found in a passage by the late eighteenth- early nineteenth century R. Ḥayyim Turer of Chernovitz. After describing the love and devotion of man to God in very strong terms, actually a fine example of mystical union, this Hasidic master writes about someone immersed in a unitive experience as follows:

Then, even fulfillment of the Torah is irrelevant because the passion of attachment is so great. This is like the case of a father and his much-loved only son who have not seen one another for many years. When they see one another face to face they embrace and kiss with a love that is as strong as death, their souls going out to one another. All their senses cease to exist, just like at the moment of death. This is the love that the children of Israel should have for their Creator, blessed be He and His name, a love of such great passion and desire, since they are a part of Him. But if they were constantly in this state there would be no Torah. One who has left the bounds of humanity can fulfill no mitzvah and can study no Torah because he has left the human condition. This is why God put it into our nature to be cut off and fall back from too much love. Then he will be able to fulfill the Torah [...] because he falls back from the aspect of *Hokhma* [...] that is the annihilation of [his] existence.⁹⁹

This remarkable text assumes that though it is possible to attain an experience which obliterates all the senses and thus also obliterates the possibility to perform ritualistic acts, it is, at the same time, also natural to return to regular religious life. The need for the Torah and its observance regulate human nature; while leaving the human condition, *ki yaşa' mi-geder ha-'adam*, he becomes united with God; being man consists in returning to the Torah and the commandments. As we learn from the context of this passage, the soul by its very nature strives to return to its source, but when there, it must retreat from dissolution in it, so as to strengthen the religious life of the group.

⁹⁸ ibidem. See also his *Da'at Moshe*, rpr. Jerusalem 1987, fol. 73a.

⁹⁹ *Sidduro shel Shabbat*, fol. 81ab; I used Arthur Green's translation, with some slight changes, found in his *Devotion and Commandment*, Cincinnati 1989, p. 87 note 103.

The mystic's return to the mundane world and to society is accompanied in Hasidic texts by magical, ritualistic and psychological features which seem to be a constant in many forms of Jewish mysticism in general. The encounter with the divine Naught that is characteristic of many Hasidic texts is not generally seen as an uroboric absorption in which the personality of the mystic dissolves but, to use Erich Neumann's categories, as a 'world-transforming' type of experience.¹⁰⁰ The Naught is a 'creative void' or 'creative nothingness'¹⁰¹ which makes for an even stronger activism after rather than before embarking upon the experience. The Hasidic emphasis upon the need to efface the ego in order to reach the supernal Naught is reminiscent of Neumann's definition of the 'mystical' as 'a fundamental category of human experience which, psychologically speaking, manifests itself whenever consciousness is not yet, or is no longer, effectively centered around the ego'.¹⁰² In the context of the above description of mysticism as contact, non-egoism is achieved by the emphasis on the centrality of the ideal via the spiritual realm. In other words, there is a certain Gestalt-coherence between the understanding of the Naught as the locus of the plenitude of being, and the active mode that is generated by the union with that Naught. Far from being a paradoxical situation, ascent and exit techniques are part of a comprehensive mystical-magical model which conjugates the ascending technique with a descending one in a manner which differs from other types of techniques, as we shall see immediately below.¹⁰³

6. THE IMAGINAIRE OF CONTINUA AND LINGUISTIC TECHNIQUES

The various sorts of continua discussed above represent types of *imaginaires* which attempt to incorporate rituals, considered to be techniques, into broader world views or images. Within the framework of these wider constructs, the unique and transient deeds of the divine are thought to be part of more stable structures having a-temporal valences, and in many cases serve as paradigmatic patterns for human beings. Drawing on biblical instances where God speaks, the many rabbinic statements elaborating on the Bible, but even more on *Sefer Yesirah*, a book which is replete with discussions about language, frameworks were created for human ritualistic use of language. The continuously existing

¹⁰⁰ 'Mystical Man', pp. 404-405, 412, 414.

¹⁰¹ ibidem, pp. 383, 388, 403.

¹⁰² ibidem, p. 378.

¹⁰³ See Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 45-145.

linguistic acts of the divine both in the supernal realm and within the created realm allowed for the exploitation of powers imagined to be inherent in language in the here and now. In a religious culture which emphasized, like many other archaic religions, the importance of concrete rituals, but one in which some of the central rites were suppressed, other rites, in our case linguistic ones, become more important, moving from the fringes to the center. In a cultural setting in which comprehensive and detailed metaphysical schemes, conspicuous in both Christian and Muslim philosophies, were also adopted by several Jewish thinkers from non-Jewish sources, a trend emerged in some elite circles to imagine sorts of ontic structures which resonated with linguistic rituals. A linguistic *imaginaire* striving to map substantial parts of the divine world could thus generate a comprehensive worldview where God, the median zones and human speech were in one coherent structure, thus enabling the mystics to have access to the supernal sphere by means of appropriate human acts.

This dual movement of the emanative process which transforms subtle linguistic units found within the divine realms into vocal manifestations in the divine world, and the ascent of the human voice as part of rituals is described in a text by R. Moses Cordovero. In a passage that provides a comprehensive explanation for the efficacy of ritual language he writes that human sounds:

will ascend from one rank to another from a subtle one to another one, up to their ascent to the [world of] emanation and there, indubitably, being in the place from which they were emanated they are subtle, spiritual essences just as they were before their being fixed in the mouth of material man and as it was their measure in the [*sefirah of Binah*]. This is the explanation for the reception of prayer, and the actions of the holy names and the preoccupation with the Torah [*'eseq ha-Torah*] [...] and in accordance with the voice that ascends on high [...] is the measure of the voice that is emanated downward so that it will become corporeal [...] and they [the people of Israel at Sinai] saw the degrees of the voices that are emanated in a descending manner [*mishtalshlim*] from above.¹⁰⁴

Clearly this passage, located at the end of one of Cordovero's most important books – and a similar passage at the end of his *Pardes Rimmonim* as we shall see in chapter 4 – uses an interpretation based on the Neo-Platonic processes of *processio* and *reversio* to account for the way in which ritualistic language

¹⁰⁴ *Shi'ur Qomah*, fol. 94c.

operates. Although formulated in a highly idiosyncratic way, as Cordovero's Kabbalah was, these two movements reflect a more general picture of worship in general. In our own era, worship was described in these terms:

In the phenomenon of worship we see two currents of life meet, one proceeding from the transcendent Reality, the other flowing from the religious life of the subject; one descending, the other ascending. These two currents are not only to be recognized in sacramental and sacrificial aspects of worship – the descending currents include all forms of revelation, the ascending, all forms of prayer.¹⁰⁵

This is a highly religious assessment founded on the objective existence of these two movements. My approach assumes the importance of the beliefs, convictions and expectations of the authors examined here in the existence and availability of these two movements. Or, in terms reminiscent of Tambiah's understanding of the function of ritual, it is the medium for bringing a cosmological scheme of a culture to life.¹⁰⁶ According to scholars of Neo-Platonism, there are affinities between techniques, even when not designated by this term, and the ensuing experiences,¹⁰⁷ and this affinity may be one of the psychosomatic explanations of such mystical experiences. This affinity is particularly obvious in the various body- and mind- exercises of Yoga, which strives to achieve results that are consonant with the primary mode of its techniques. In other words, without addressing the ontological question of the existence or inexistence of the entities and powers imagined by the Jewish mystics, and in principle by any other mystic, my assumption is that the various sorts of *imaginaires* operating in a certain religion might have created paramount experiences of plenitude, emerging from the belief in the possibility of establishing contact with and even activating these cord-like structures – which were imagined to be ontological entities – by cultivating mystical techniques. The technique allows the mystic to strike a balance between some of his capacities and the supernal cords, i.e., the structures to which he attempts to link himself. Needless to say I do not privilege, in principle, the cord imagery as

¹⁰⁵ See Underhill, *Worship*, p. 10, quoting Robert Will's book *Le Culte*. See also below, 'Concluding Remarks', note 67.

¹⁰⁶ See S.J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action*, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, p. 129.

¹⁰⁷ See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 299 dealing with contemplation of light as part of a technique and the apparitions of light, in the *Chaldean Oracles* and Neoplatonism; Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, pp. 170-188.

more effective or more central in mystical literatures in general. My basic approach is pragmatic, attempting to capitalize on strategies which are found and influential in certain corpora of literature I am better acquainted with. However, without claiming that the cord *imaginaire* is crucial to an understanding of mysticism in general, the mechanism that underlies it may nevertheless reveal a more comprehensive, though not universal, principle, namely that mysticism has a great deal to do with transformation, whose ultimate role is an assimilation to the divine realm. In order to achieve this goal, it needs techniques to achieve transformation, and the ideal ontology or a strong personalistic paradigm, to which to assimilate. For example, the instances of the appearance of stigmata certainly show a strong identification with the *imaginaire* of the suffering of Christ.

As made clear by Cordovero's passage, and by many other quotes to be discussed below, the dual movement emphasizes the importance of the circulation of energy, and the activation of potencies found in man, nature and the divinity. This metastatic vision, to use Voegelin's term, is connected to both mysticism and magic, and can be described as a process of metabolism activating reality as a whole. Mystical techniques thus not only touch on an individual's spiritual attainment, but also contribute to broader areas of reality, namely society and God. However, the two anchors between which the processes that concern us take place are man and God, a bipolar vision which comprises the two extremes of the Great Chain of Being.

From this point of view at least, these techniques differ dramatically from the 'arresting' or fixing techniques of Yoga, intended as they are to enhance the capacity of concentration, stasis, radical transcendence of ordinary modes of activity, or an attainment of an anticipation of death.¹⁰⁸ Whereas the following chapters will deal with techniques for intensification of ordinary modes of activity, even in the case of the pronunciation of the divine names, Yoga techniques strive to reverse ordinary processes to achieve an experience of stasis. To use a distinction made by Eliade, Jewish mystical techniques are more ecstatic and shamanic, whereas Yoga is more enstatic.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ See Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 359-364. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 39-40, idem, 'Sexual metaphors and praxis in the Kabbalah', *The Jewish Family*, ed. David Kraemer, Oxford, New York, London 1989, pp. 205-206.

¹⁰⁹ Eliade, *Ibidem*, p. 361.

Chapter 2

Receiving God by/in His Name

Thou are in Thy Name and Thy name is in Thee
— *Shi'ur Qomah*

1. REACHING GOD BY HIS NAMES

Everyday experience shows that we are more strongly responsive to our names than to anything else. Orally or, especially for academicians, in written form, there is an immediate and direct reaction to hearing or seeing one's first or last name. Somewhere in our consciousness perhaps there is an area for our names, an area that is central to sustaining our identity or identities. A name connects this inner center with the external world, and a name, as a linguistic unit, elicits an immediate response. The idea that names could be access codes or even the core of identity still needs more detailed psychological examination that transcends the present framework. In any case, the magical powers connected to knowing the name of a supernal entity, angels or even God, are well known, and this is one of the reasons for the secrecy of these names.¹

The divine name plays several different functions in Judaism. Its recitation by the High Priest represented the culmination of the ritual of the Day of Atonement in the Temple. Knowing its pronunciation became an esoteric topic, and various strands of Jewish literature, especially the mystical ones emphasize how important this knowledge was. The scholarly literature on the divine names in Judaism is enormous and I shall mention only a few of the relevant bibliographical references.² Here it is impossible to explore the entire spectrum

¹ See Idel, 'The Origin'; Meir Bar Ilan, '*Shemot shel Mal'akhim*', *Ve-'Eileh Shemot, Mehqarim be-'Oṣar ha-Shemot ha-Yehudiim*, ed. A. Demsky, J.A. Reif, J. Tabori, Ramat Gan 1997, pp. 35-36

² Abraham Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, London 1927, pp. 41-107; Samuel S. Cohon, 'The Name of God A Study in Rabbinic Theology', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 24/1 (1950-1951), pp. 579-604; K.E. Groezinger, 'The Names of God and their Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature, Early Jewish Mysticism', ed. J. Dan, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987), pp. 53-69,

of the use of divine names even in one single major branch of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. In what follows, I deal mainly with one specific use of the divine names; namely, their role as a central part of mystical techniques in ecstatic Kabbalah, which involve both instructions, and in a few cases even explicit confessions by kabbalists who used them.

The theory that through the use of a divine name a person can have a mystical experience is fundamental to a school of theosophical theurgical Kabbalah that deviated radically from mainstream Kabbalah – R. Abraham Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah. Crucial as this theory was for his writings that gravitate around techniques related to divine names, Abulafia was apparently not the first to have formulated it. The issue goes beyond parallels in other cultures, where repetitions of divine names were used to induce paranormal experiences, such as in Sufism, Orthodox Christian mysticism and Buddhism.³ Early in Jewish writings, long before the flourishing of R. Abraham Abulafia's prophetic Kabbalah, a theory was put forward, if not more explicitly articulated. The importance of the divine name and its recitation in the Psalms, and its numerous reverberations in later Jewish views indicate that earlier traditions existed. The many traditions found in the literature of the Heikhalot writers and in the Hasidei Ashkenaz, which was apparently one of the main sources for Abulafia's Kabbalah, point in this direction. Some interest in topics related to

Michael Swartz, *Scholastic Magic, Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1996; John Dillon, 'The Magical Power of the Names in Origen and Later Platonism', *Origeniana Tertia*, eds. R. Hanson-H. Crousel, Rome 1985, pp. 207-208. See also Naomi Janowitz, 'Theories of the Divine Names in Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius', *History of Religions* 30 (1991), pp. 360-365. For various medieval understandings of divine names see, especially, G. Scholem, 'The Name of God'; Haviva Pedaya, "Flaw" and "Correction" in the Concept of the Godhead in the Teachings of Rabbi Isaac the Blind', *The Beginning of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, ed. J. Dan, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 157-185; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 234-269; Idel, 'Defining Kabbalah'; J. Dan, *On Sanctity*, pp. 123-130; *L'Analyse du langage théologique: Le Nom de Dieu*, Montaigne 1969, pp. 135-144. For some of the topics to be discussed below see especially Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', pp. 26-30.

³ See Irene Hausherr, 'La méthode d'oraison hesychaste', *Orientalia Christiana* 9 (1927), pp. 68-69; G.C. Anawati et L. Gardet, *Mystique musulmane, aspects et tendances, expériences et techniques*, Paris 1976, pp. 187-34; G. Anawati, 'Le nom suprême de Dieu', *Études de philosophie musulmane*, Paris 1974, pp. 404-405; M. Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 200 ff, esp. pp. 216-219, where the similarities between the Sufi *dhikr* and parallel Hindu phenomena are noted; D.T. Suzuki, *Essais sur le Bouddhisme Zen*, Paris 1943, vol. 2, pp. 141-151.

divine names can also be found in eleventh and twelfth century Spanish authors such as R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol, R. Yehudah ha- Levi, and R. Abraham ibn Ezra,⁴ and R. Abraham Abulafia might have been acquainted with their views as well, in addition to the theories of the early Spanish theosophical-theurgical kabbalists, and those found in R. Isaac ibn Latif's writings. Aside from these plausible sources, external influences, both Sufi and Hindu⁵ can also be seen in Abulafia's technique of recitation of the divine name.

Nevertheless, the possibility and likelihood of external influence should not preclude a search of Jewish sources for Abulafia's theory on the efficacy of pronouncing the divine names. One of his older contemporaries, active in Germany and presumably an individual who was not influenced by Abulafia's writings, stated that: 'Whoever knows it [the divine name] and prays using it, the *Shekhinah* dwells upon him and he prophesies like the ancient prophets'.⁶ According to this master, the specific context for the use of the divine name is prayer: whoever knows the divine name can activate it such that it may have a mystical and prophetic effect. In other words, the writer is describing a nomian practice where recitation of the divine name may not have breached rabbinic prohibitions. However, there were also less traditional uses of divine names among the Ashkenazi masters. Toward the end of the first part of the thirteenth century, an anonymous 'anti-philosophical' Provençal critique of French traditionalist sages dealing with magical uses of divine names accuses them of defining themselves as 'masters of the name, among the famous prophets of truth'.⁷ In a critique of Ashkenazi thought and practices, the mid-thirteenth century R. Moses Taku writes:

⁴ A. Parnes, 'The Mentioning of the Name in the Poems of R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol', *Knesset* 7 (1942), pp. 280-293 (Hebrew); Dov Schwartz, 'The Magical Significance of the Divine Name (On Poetry and Thought in the Oeuvre of R. Abraham ibn Ezra)', *Biqqoret U-Farshanut* 32 (1998), pp. 39-51 (Hebrew).

⁵ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 14,24,25,39.

⁶ See R. Moses Azriel ben Eleazar ha-Darshan, a descendant of R. Yehudah ha-Hasid, printed by Gershom Scholem, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv 1948, p. 222 (Hebrew); M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven 1988, p. 169; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through the Speculum*, p. 267. For more on prayer and revelation, see chapter 4.

⁷ Printed by Joseph Schatzmiller, 'Contributions for a Picture of the First Controversy on the Writings of Maimonides', *Zion* 34 (1969), p. 143 (Hebrew); see also Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, Jerusalem 2000, p. 115 (Hebrew).

Two of those who were lacking in knowledge [among] the schismatics, [decided] to make themselves prophets, and they used to recite Holy Names, and at times performed *kavvanot* during this recitation, and the soul was astounded, and the body fell down and was exhausted; but for such as these there is no barrier to the soul, and the soul becomes the principal thing [in their constitution] and sees afar; [but] after one hour, when the power of that Name which had been mentioned departs, he returns to what he was, with a confused mind.⁸

Here, divine names are considered to be available and effective means of inducing experiences of clairvoyance, and were used de facto by certain individuals, some time at the beginning of the thirteenth century who believed that by uttering these letters, they could reach a prophetic state. This is quite a rare assumption, though not totally exceptional, as is shown by other indirect references in Ashkenazi literature that have been dealt with elsewhere.⁹ Interestingly enough, the above passage uses the term *kavvanot*, which in Provençal and Catalan types of Kabbalah means mystical intentions during prayer.¹⁰ It is hard to know whether the occurrence of this term in the above passage is indicative of the use of the divine name during prayer in a way similar to both the kabbalists and R. Moshe Azriel ben Eleazar. A more moderate view would assume that divine names indeed were still known and believed effective, but not to the extent that they could confer the status of prophet. An oneiric formula reads:

God, my Lord, let my supplication come before you and answer the questions that I ask you, because of our sins, we have no prophet, neither a priest, neither *urim* and *tummim*¹¹ and the divine spirit has ceased to be among us, and this is why we implore by Your Name¹²

There is a sense of both despair and daring in this formula: despair because of the absence of the classical channels of communication with the divine, and daring because recourse to the only remaining device, the divine name, was felt

⁸ *Ketav Tammim*, printed in 'Oşar Neħmad 3 (1860), p. 84; G. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 102-103.

⁹ See Idel; *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ See Idel, *On R. Isaac the Blind*, pp. 31-36.

¹¹ See I Sam 28:6.

¹² Ms. Parma, de Rossi 2785, fol. 97a. This magic formula may stem from kabbalistic circles. See also the text printed in Idel, *Inquiries*, p. 190; Michael Schwartz, *Temple Ritual in Jewish Magical Literature*, *Pe'amim* 85 (2000), p. 67 (Hebrew).

to be a major religious taboo. It was only the desolate religious plight of the Jews that drove them, according to this plea and many others similar to it, to appeal to a divinatory quality of the divine name.

R. Abraham Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah is much more optimistic in his belief that the divine names may indeed induce a mystical experience. Nahmanides' vision of the possibility of reading the Torah as a continuum of divine names is mentioned along with *Sefer Yeširah* as one of the sources dealing with the divine names found in the Torah. These positions, he confesses: 'illuminated the eyes of my heart so that we enjoyed the splendor of the *Shekhinah*, by these holy and pure names'.¹³ Abulafia formulated his conviction in many ways; one of the most explicit and influential ones is as follows:

[Kabbalah] is divided into two parts: one is the part that deals with the knowledge of God by the way of the ten *sefirot* known as branches [...] these [branches] reveal the secret of unity. The other part [of Kabbalah] consists of the knowledge of God through the twenty-two letters, out of which, and out of whose vowels and cantillation-marks, the divine names and the seals [*hotamot*]¹⁴ are composed. They [the names and the seals] speak with the prophets in their dreams, in the [practice of] *'urim* and *tummim*, in the Divine Spirit and during prophecy.¹⁵

Abulafia's definition is ostensibly derived from the first paragraph of *Sefer Yeširah*, where the creation of the world is described as having been brought about by the thirty-two paths made up of the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters. The definition of the first type of Kabbalah as the ten *sefirot* with intra-divine powers or alternatively as divine instruments is consistent with a vast amount of kabbalistic material dealing with the ten divine attributes. The second type of Kabbalah is basically a body of lore on the divine names. However artificial this distinction may seem, it reflects a crucial phenomenological difference between different types of thirteenth-century Kabbalah. Language, the main material for kabbalistic manipulation, is represented here by divine names and seals, which are less semantically active. Here the main aim is the transformation of the human mind, which is seen as

¹³ *Gan Na'ul*, Ms. München 58, fol. 317a.

¹⁴ The seals are different combinations of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton which, according to *Sefer Yeširah*, seal the different extremities of the universe.

¹⁵ *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, p. 15, corrected according to Ms. New York, JTSA 1887, fol. 98b.

capable of being united with God's intellect or the Agent Intellect. This anthropocentric tendency diverges from the strong theocentric emphasis in types of Kabbalah where the ten *sefirot* were cast as metaphysical entities. The theosophical kabbalist unifies the higher, divine powers to each other, whereas for the ecstatic kabbalist the human intellect undergoes transformation. Mystical metaphysics, in fact theosophy, which was so widespread in the dominant form of Kabbalah, as well as the centrality of mystical intention during the performance of the commandments, was marginalized to the extreme by the ecstatic kabbalist and replaced by use of language as a means of directing the soul.

Let us compare the end of Abulafia's passage to the oneiric imploration quoted above. In addition to a similar enumeration of forms of divination, the imploration also uses an expression found in another passage from Abulafia quoted below. In the imploration the divine name 'engraved in my heart' is part of the process of questioning, as is a similar phrase in Abulafia's book on prophecy.¹⁶ It may not be accidental that a short quote from a book by Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* (which will be mentioned below) is found together with some formulae for dream-questions.¹⁷ Abulafia describes an ascending ladder of divinatory stages where dreams come first and are followed by *'urim ve-tummim*, Divine Spirit and prophecy. This specific interpretation of the biblical forms of oracles attracted Abulafia's attention and his views on the topic were crucial for R. Nathan Harar, the author of *Sha'arei Šedeq*.¹⁸

All four of these stages contain the dual assumption that revelation is connected to or induced by divine names, and that the answer to the queries is expressed in linguistic form. In a commentary on one of his books on prophecy, the *Sefer ha-'Edut* (*Book of Testimony*), Abulafia writes:

MoSheH knew God [*ha-Shem*] by means of the name [*shem*], and God [*ha-Shem*] also knew *MoSheH* by means of the name [*ha-shem*].¹⁹

Here Abulafia uses a triple pun: the Hebrew term for 'name' is Shem, which is also one of the terms which refers to God. Thus, knowledge of God is acquired

¹⁶ *Sefer ha-'Ot*, p. 80, See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 103.

¹⁷ See Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1965, fols. 20b-21a.

¹⁸ Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 105-108, 158-160; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 125-126. ; on *'Urim ve-Tummim* see several references in the context of ecstatic Kabbalah discussed in Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, p. 543, index under entry *'Urim ve-tummim*.

¹⁹ See *Sefer ha-'Edut*, Ms. München 285, fol. 39b.

through His name, and both concepts are couched in the very same linguistic unit. However, the protagonist of this enterprise is none other than Moses, the consonants of whose name (in Hebrew, *MoSheH*) – when written in an inverted order – produce *ha-Shem*, namely God or the Name. If a mystic uses the divine name to reach the divine realm as part of a technique, how does God know Moses by means of his name? Does the name stand for a linguistic unit that has a cognitive facet? Or, perhaps, given the pun on the same consonants, is God's knowing Moses a reflective knowledge, a way to know Himself? Or, more radically, is God reflecting on something found in Himself, as in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book *Lamda*? Given the circular construction: A knew B by C, and B knew A by C, when C is in a form identical to B, can we refer to a type of cognition in which C, the divine name, is the act of knowledge, A the intellect and B the *intelligibilia* – in the first part of the passage, and A the *intelligibilia* and B the intellect in the second part of the passage? Or, to put it differently: did Abulafia transpose Aristotle's (and Maimonides') theory of divine cognition into linguistic terms? In his commentary to his own *Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, he writes:

Raziel²⁰ intended to announce us His Name, may He be blessed, in an Occult way, to bring us near Him, may His Name be blessed [...] and he divided the words and sometimes set one letter aside, as if it were a whole word in order to show that according to the Kabbalah each and every letter is a separate world. And he ordered those who see²¹ this divine and marvelous power, to acknowledge His Name, may He be blessed.²²

The letters referred to here are those of the Tetragrammaton; however, Abulafia split more than the Tetragrammaton into single letters; he considered this technique to be a comprehensive way of mystically understanding texts, the high point of the seven methods of interpretation. The description of the seventh method reads in part: 'Each and every letter [of the biblical verse] by itself, stands separate'.²³ This method of dividing the verses ends with a state of

²⁰ i.e. Abulafia, who chooses theophoric names for himself, as we shall see below.

²¹ The meaning of the 'vision' of the 'force' is vague, and seems to suggest that the division of words into letters is connected to a certain type of contemplation, and probably to letters and not to sounds. This may be compared to Hasidic contemplation which is intent on the perception of the spiritual force inherent in the letters.

²² Ms. Roma-Angelica 38, fol. 6a; Ms. Munich 285, fol. 10a and Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* pp. 106-107.

²³ Abraham Abulafia, 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 172b. For the context of this sentence see M. Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in*

cleaving to Unity, and man then receives the power to perform miracles. Furthermore, this atomistic approach to written letters has a significant parallel as regards their utterances. In a magical fragment, akin to Abulafia's *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, the author writes:

It is necessary to know how it [the Divine Name] is read during its pronunciation, since each and every letter has to be pronounced in one single breath, as though the spirit was issuing out of the person [who pronounces it] out loud.

The benefit of this type of reading is 'to receive the efflux of wisdom and [the power] of creation'.²⁴ In another book of his, written much later, he recommends distrusting a mystical tradition dealing:

with the knowledge of God by [means of] the Name,²⁵ unless the individual provides proof and demonstrations from the paths of that notable book,²⁶ or from those books similar to it belonging to the books of the sages of Kabbalah, blessed be their memory, or from the Written Torah.²⁷

Thus, the knowledge of God through his name stems mainly from *Sefer Yeširah*, and books influenced by it, which are defined as kabbalistic books. In the end of this book, Abraham's use of the combination of letters culminates in an experience of revelation, which however hardly has anything to do with divine names. Attributing the formula *ha-Shem ba-Shem* 'God by Name' to *Sefer Yeširah* is related to Abulafia's specific understanding of this book as esoterically teaching the meaning of one of the most important topics in Jewish esotericism, *ma'aṣeh merkavah*, the story of the Chariot, which, for this kabbalist deals with the interpenetration of the letters of one divine name with the letters of another. In his opinion, the affinity between *Sefer Yeširah* and the

Abraham Abulafia, Albany 1989, pp. 106–107. Compare also to *Sha'arei Šedeq*, pp. 28–30.

²⁴ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 26; Idel *Golem, Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, Albany 1990, pp. 96–99. Two close parallels are quoted, see pp. 24–26, and see also in *Ner 'Elohim*, an ecstatic treatise from Abulafia's school, Ms. Munich 10, fol. 164b. On utterances see this volume 'Concluding Remarks', section 1.

²⁵ *Yediy'at ha-Shem ba-Shem*.

²⁶ i.e., *Sefer Yeširah*.

²⁷ *Gan Na'ul*, Ms. München 58, fol. 318b. See also Ibid., fol. 317a. He also writes in the same vein in his letter to Barcelona mentioned above; see *Ve-Zot Li-Yehudah*, p. 15; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 162–164.

concept of *ma'aseh merkavah* has to do with the fact that both books start with the same word: *bi-sheloshim*, and thus the consonants of one name are found within another. The *Commentary on the Liturgy* by R. Azriel of Gerona, already uses the phrase ‘*šeiref shem ba-shem*’ – God ‘combined the name by [or with] the name’.²⁸ Thus as in the *Sefer Yesirah*, God is described as combining letters of the divine names. Abulafia repeatedly makes the point that the numerical equivalents of the consonants of *shem ba-shem* equal the numerical value of the consonants of *ma'aseh merkavah*, and *be-sheloshim*.²⁹ Thus, the phrase that describes the knowledge of God by his name was used by this kabbalist to designate a technique to acquire knowledge of the divinity.

What is the nature of this knowledge? Does it reflect a theological insight into the uniqueness of the divine or its unity? Does it reflect Aristotle's philosophical belief that knowledge is the identification of the knower with the known during the act of intellection? To return to the question left open above: does Abulafia translate Aristotle's gnoseology into linguistic terms? If so, this would constitute one of Abulafia's main contributions to medieval Jewish mysticism as an interpretation drawing on both linguistic magic with its mystical leanings in Jewish sources and the Aristotelian-Maimonidean mentalistic approach.

Let us turn now to a series of passages from Abulafia's most important and widely known handbook describing his technique: *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*. It explains how to live the life of the world to come while still alive in this world. When describing the nature of Kabbalah he writes:³⁰

This is the lore of the [divine] names, which alone truly brings man to ultimate perfection, which is the comprehension of the Lord, many times by little effort, after a short time, if his constitution [is proper] and [so is his] preparation and he is as mentioned above [...] I will now tell you what to do in order to attain God by name. Know, my son – may God [*ha-shem*] help you – that the Name [*ha-shem*] is His essence [*'asmo*], and His essence is his Name [*shemo*] and the

²⁸ Ms. Parma, de Rossi 1, fol. 32b; Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1398, fol. 206b. For a French translation see Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *Azriel de Gerone, Commentaire sur la liturgie quotidienne*, Leiden 1974, pp. 48-49.

²⁹ On this topic see the various passages analyzed in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 49-52; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 169-170.

³⁰ Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fol. 47a.

name that is specific to Him is composed of four letters and they are *YWH'Α* and they are the hidden letters.³¹

Abulafia is describing a theory he often alludes to in his writings. He hints that the secret name is not identical to the Tetragrammaton, but consists of *'HWY*, a combination of three of its consonants, *YHW*, and the '*aleph*', the first consonant of the name '*Adonai*'. The two divine names, the Tetragrammaton and '*Adonai*' occur together in Ezekiel, where they introduce the speech of God³² but the ecstatic kabbalist assumes that they were chosen in this context in a very deliberate manner. The importance of the double identification of the name with the divine essence and vice-versa is a crucial one. For a technique based on divine names, the identity of the divine essence with a name, albeit hidden, prepares the groundwork for the transition between the name as technique and the name as God, and the name as the locus of mystical experience.

Abulafia's the theory of knowing God by knowing His name is paralleled by an anonymous kabbalistic treatise written in the mode of the linguistic Kabbalah of his student, R. Joseph Gikatilla. The anonymous author describes Hebrew as an intellectual language in *Tisha'h Peraqim Bi-Yihud* where we read:

Of all the languages there is none that attains the quality of the Holy language. And this is due to the fact that the [use of] the Holy language [is identical] to the use of the Blessed Name, and the secret of the Great Name instructs us on the essence of God, Blessed be He. Thus, anyone who purifies his intellect, secludes himself and becomes illuminated with keen intellect in comprehending His Great and Blessed Name, will understand in his mind the truth of the Creator of the World.³³

As Vajda pointed out, parts of this work are highly similar to Gikatilla's *Ginnat 'Egoz* and it is quite possible that its theory of language was influenced by the traditional school from which Abulafia emerged. Common to both is the combination of Aristotelian and linguistic thought, in which the divine name plays a central role.

Abulafia was not the first to claim that God is identical with His name. The

³¹ '*Ottiyyot ne'elamot*, namely the letters which are not pronounced when they appear at the end of a word, or *mater lectionis*.

³² Cf. Ez 39:20,29.

³³ Attributed to Maimonides and published by Georges Vajda in *Kobez al Yad* 5 (5711-1951) p. 127. See also Idel, *Le Traité Pseudo-Maimonidean 'Neuf Chapitres sur l'Unité de Dieu'*, AHDLMA 38 (1953), pp. 83-98.

Shi'ur Qomah, written in late antiquity states:

His name is from Him and in Him is the name of His Glory [...] and Your name is in You and You are in Your name.³⁴

The meaning is difficult to ascertain, but the connection between it and Abulafia's stance is straightforward. In the thirteenth century there was a certain interest in this formula in books by theosophical kabbalists such as R. Azriel of Gerona, R. Moses de León, R. Joseph of Hamadan and R. Isaac of Acre, and even a philosophically oriented author in fourteenth century Provence, R. David Kokhavi, mentions it.³⁵ Although it was an ancient linguo-theology, one that was well established in ancient Jewish texts which portray the supernal realm in linguistic terms, it flourished in the Middle Ages among some of the Jewish elite, but reached its peak in late thirteenth century.³⁶ The specific meaning of Abulafia's passage regarding the hidden divine name may be better understood by comparing it to another, found in a book either written by Abulafia or by a student of his, where the assumption is that the consonants composing the divine names also make up the words '*aHWY*', and *Ha-DYN*.³⁷

This ecstatic kabbalist claims that whoever knows this secret will be the Master who governs all mundane matters, and will be called 'the angel of

³⁴ See Martin S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, Tübingen 1985, p. 188, according to the varia of some manuscripts.

³⁵ See Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', pp. 27-47; Asi Farber-Ginat, 'Inquiries in *Shi'ur Qomah*', eds. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich, *Massu'ot, Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 361-394 (Hebrew).

³⁶ See Idel *The Concept of the Torah*, pp. 50-51, 66-67; R. Moses De León, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, p. 364; Wolfson, 'Mystical Rationalization', p. 225; R. Isaac of Acre, 'Osar Hayyim', Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fols. 127b, 180a. See also Ibn Gabbai, 'Avodat ha-Qodesh', III, ch. 59, fol. 111d and R. Abraham Azulai in his commentary on the Bible entitled *Ba'alei Eerit Abram*, fol. 46a: 'His names are His essence'. For Kokhavi see the passage quoted in Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, p. 208: 'the (divine) name is His self and his essence ('asmo ve-'ammito'). A similar position is found, in a less explicit manner, in R. Levi ben Abraham, a controversial Provençal thinker of the late thirteenth century. See his *Livyat Hen*, Ms. Vatican 192, fol. 76a, Ms. Munich 58, fol. 153a. We have more to say about the mystical implications attributed to the use of the divine name in Hasidism in connection to attraction of the divine by studying Torah in ch. 3. See also R. Berakhiel Qafmat, a mid-sixteenth century Mantuan kabbalist, whose view was cited in R. Yehudah Moscato's commentary on ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, IV, par. 25, Warsaw 1885, IV, p. 125. R. Shlomo Ro'cha, *Kavanat Shlomo*, fol. 23b, and chapter 3, section 5.

³⁷ See Ms. Paris BN 680, fol. 298a.

'Elohim' a clearly apotheotic theory.³⁸ In addition to considering the external status of the name as identical to God or some angelic or intellectual powers, Abulafia envisaged the name as an entity which permeates the mystic's spirit:

When the Name, whose secret is in blood and ink, begins to move within him, and he feels it, like one who knows the place of a stone which is within him, he will then know that the knowledge of the Name has acted in him, and it has begun to cause him to pass from potentiality to actuality.³⁹

For a kabbalist whose main mystical activity is combining the letters of the divine name, including in writing, what appears to be related to scholastic numerical considerations may have an experiential dimension (either initially or post factum), as discussed regarding the activation of the blood during the mystical experience.⁴⁰ In any case, the quote sheds light on the possible meaning of the word *ha-meniy'a*, 'the activator': it is the divine name referred to in the quote above as *mitno'e'a*. The name, which is repeated many times, becomes an independent entity that activates inner processes of the mystic who is immersed in recitation.

This internalization of the divine name is obviously related to Abulafia's penchant for adopting theophoric names for himself, and even attributing these names to his disciples. He called himself *Razi' el*, *Berakhiah*, or *Zakhariah* and gave his followers other theophoric names such as '*Ana' el* and *Haqi' el*. These names often refer mystical achievements or acts, such as pronouncing the divine name, *Zakhariah*, or knowing the secrets of God, *Razi' el*. I assume that this may be the case with Moshe in the quote discussed above. It is a theophoric name, which indicates a certain affinity to God. In a passage in a book by R. Shema'yah ben Isaac ha-Levi, a late thirteenth century Castilian kabbalist writing in the early eighties, *Mosheh* is described as being numerically equal to '*El Shaddai*', namely 345. He writes that:

One of the great secrets of the secrets of our Torah is that when *Mosheh* was born the Name [*ha-Shem*] was revealed and became widespread in the world by

³⁸ See Ms. Paris, *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Ms. München 58, fol. 328a. For the fuller context of this quote see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New Haven 2002, pp. 341, 438-448. See also an important discussion of blood and ink in relation to the different forms of the divine name in Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Melammed*, Ms. Paris BN 680, fols. 291b-298a. This is the correct order of the folios unlike the one found today in the sole extant Parisian manuscript.

⁴⁰ See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 340-346.

MoSheh [...] Since Mosheh was seen [in the world] the name '*El Shaddai*' was concealed, and was not so much in use. And [then] the Glory of YHWH was revealed, and behold that since he was called *Mosheh* and since it was concealed until *Mosheh* came, then the proof was revealed by him [...] and the face of *Mosheh* was like the face of the name of God, blessed be He, and understand that before the birth of *Mosheh* the essence of the name YHWH was not known [...] and God said that since I have become revealed by you, the name '*El Shaddai*' is concealed and the Glory of YHWH is revealed.⁴¹

What does this revelation imply? Is Moses the harbinger of the authentic divine name, the Tetragrammaton, a new message for mankind, in a way comparable to Abulafia's disclosure of the 'real' divine name? Or is Moses's birth a more ontological revelation of the divine in general, through His Name? This ontological reading seems more likely. Immediately after this passage, R. Shema'yah discusses the relationship between Metatron, the archangelic figure, and the name *Shaddai*. The name of the servant, Metatron, is the same as that of his master, and the explanation in the rabbinic view was that both equal the number 314. This is commonplace in medieval Jewish literature. However, the key feature is the description of *Shaddai* as 'the seal of the king' which is 'comprised in the secret of Metatron'.⁴² The angel is 'shows everyone the flag and the seal of the king' and as a servant he speaks for his master, and governs all. The explanation for Metatron's status is that dominion was emanated and drawn from the divine name is quite substantial.⁴³ This vision of Metatron as externalizing a divine attribute. If this is the case, the same status can be attributed to Moses. He externalizes the divine name, he is the Glory of YHWH, and mentioning the similarity between the divine face and that of Moses further strengthens this feature. Thus the divine name is somehow inscribed in Moses, just as divine names were inscribed in the angels, according to certain ancient traditions.⁴⁴ This position had reverberations in Hasidei Ashkenaz literature as

⁴¹ *Sefer Seror he-Hayyim*, Ms. Leiden, Warner 24, fol. 199ab. For the play on words *Mosheh - Shemah*, in Samaritan sources see Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of God*, Tübingen 1985, p. 88.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Schlem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 71. See also R. Eleazar of Worms, *Sodhei Razayya*, ed. Shalom Weiss, Jerusalem 1991, p. 167 and the fascinating discussion by R. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, pp. 174-175, who takes the name of an angel to be its soul and thus accounts for the magic technique which uses names in order to conjure up angels.

well. In R. Shema'yah, Moses like Metatron constitutes a theophany.

In the writings of Abulafia and R. Shema'yah ben Isaac ha-Levi, ecstatic techniques and practices based upon the pronunciation of the divine names and assigning theophoric proper names absorb the divine name into the believer, or the divine presence by means of the divine name. Abulafia says the divine name was engraved on his heart. He defined the special status of the mystic as a matter of apotheosis, whereas Moses is seen as a theophany in the views of R. Shema'yah.

The close ties between linguistic technique and the nature of the experience are also found in a follower of Abulafia, R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥarar. In his *Sha'arei Šedeq* he summarizes the Sufi practice of *dikhr* based on the name of God 'Allah', and explains how this recitation generates a mystical experience:

I had an additional look [at this issue] and speculated that since they recite the letters and cleanse the thought of their soul in a perfect manner [...] the letters 'Allah' operate upon them according to their nature and because of the multitude of their action, they⁴⁵ are affected, but they do not feel by what [they are affected].[⁴⁶

This short description is crucial to an understanding of this notion. R. Shema'yah makes the pertinent point that the mystic is affected by the letters he recites so many times. Though he speaks about a cathartic process of cleansing the human soul of thoughts, the main mode of influence of the letters 'Allah' is the impression they leave on the mystic. In other words, the letters are repeated – a technical repetition – but at a certain point the force of the repetition creates a new dynamic where these same letters reveal themselves to the mystics either in an auditory or a visual manner. According to R. Nathan, the Sufi did not understand what source revealed itself and facilitated the knowledge of the future. The kabbalists, however, who received the tradition, knew that the Hebrew letters represented a supernal reality that could reveal itself.⁴⁷ They believed that they were living in a time of exile when a lesser divine name governed; i.e. the name 'Adonai', and they used letters from this name in a technique derived from Abulafia. His position, however, unlike R. Shema'yah's concept of Moses' revelation of the Tetragrammaton, was that the Tetragrammaton will only be revealed in the eschaton and will produce a

⁴⁵ The Sufi.

⁴⁶ Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 476-477.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 17.

dramatic change in man's ability to attain union with the divine.⁴⁸ Somewhat like R. Shema'yah's theophanic vision of Moses, R. Nathan's interpretation dwells on the interpretation of the name YHWH:

And this is the name by which he will be called 'YHWH our righteous one'.⁴⁹ And this is the matter of [the verse]⁵⁰ 'Behold an angel will walk before you'. And he said to him 'Do not betray him because My Name is within him'.⁵¹ But Moses, blessed be his memory, did not want to be under his dominion, namely to change himself,⁵² and become the attribute of mercy under [the dominion of] the attribute of judgment. This is why he said: 'If your Face does not walk, do not send us up from here'.⁵³ And this is a very sublime matter; many quandaries of the Torah will be solved when this is understood.⁵⁴

The transformation of lower man into supernal man is tantamount to being called by the Tetragrammaton and becoming the attribute of mercy. As this attribute, Moses refused to subordinate himself to the angel who represents the attribute of judgment, an attribute that stands for the human power of imagination, in contrast to the attribute of mercy which stands for the power of the intellect.⁵⁵ Examples where a human being is called by the Tetragrammaton are rare but not entirely absent from rabbinic literature. The righteous and the Messiah are designated by the Tetragrammaton, with the same biblical verse given as proof.⁵⁶ The use of the Tetragrammaton to represent the new status of the mystic, or the mystical process as the transition from the human to divine dominion may be related to the presence of the divine. The kabbalist's undisclosed 'great secret' may be that during the encounter between the mystic and the divine, the boundaries between the two are blurred, and the lower is called by the name of the higher. In other words, the culmination of the

⁴⁸ Ibid. More on this issue see my introduction to *Le porte della Giustizia*, pp. 71-111. It should be mentioned that both *Šeror ha-Hayyim* and *Sha'arei Šedeq*, two books mentioned in quite a few manuscripts, are extant in the same codex, Ms. Leiden, Warner 24.

⁴⁹ Jeremiah 23:5

⁵⁰ Exodus 32:34

⁵¹ Exodus 23:2.

⁵² *le-hithapek̼ti*. On the importance of this verb in this book see the occurrences in *Sha'arei Šedeq*, ed. J.E. Porush, Jerusalem 1989, pp. 16, 17, 29.

⁵³ Exodus 33:15

⁵⁴ *Sha'arei Šedeq*, ed. Porush, p. 20.

⁵⁵ See Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, p. 194 note 4.

⁵⁶ *BT, Babba' Eatra'*, fol. 75b.

experience during which God speaks from the mouth of the mystic may be described as a sort of apotheosis. Whether or not R. Nathan believed in a linguistic continuum linking the supernal letters found in the divine realm to the ordinary Hebrew letters is a complex question. However, a continuity of linguistic elements may permeate all the levels of reality, as was the case for the Platonic chain of being, or an even more continuous cord. In any case, awareness of the affinities between the two realms is important in his thought, since it can account for the special efficacy of using Hebrew letters in mystical techniques.

2. GOD WITHIN THE NAME

In a recent paper, Charles Malamoud summarized the Mimansa interpretation of the names of gods as follows: 'The reality of the gods is the name they bear and which is invoked when one makes a ritual offering'.⁵⁷ This analysis of Hindu doctrine also applies to some kabbalistic schools. The perception of the name is, in the final analysis, the perception of the entity represented by that name. In the texts dealt with above, *ha-shem ba-shem* was translated as follows: the first *ha-Shem* was understood as God and the second one was an instrumental or technical use of the name: through the name, God is attained. However, the particle *be* in Hebrew also means 'in', or 'within'. Hence the composite term could be translated as 'God within the name'. Such a reading is not so far removed from a passage in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, where Abulafia expressly says that God's essence is His name, and the earlier *Shi'ur Qomah* passages analyzed above.

However, additional key background information also comes into play. In ancient Hellenistic, Arabic, and Jewish medieval magic, the dominant view was that the spiritual forces found in celestial bodies could be attracted downwards. These forces, called *pneumata* in Greek, *ruhaniyyat* in Arabic and *ruhaniyyot* in Hebrew, could be attracted and captured by special types of objects and rituals having features that corresponded to the celestial bodies. These objects in Arabic were called *hayakhal*, or palaces. This concept and practice was studied by S. Pines, who provided a detailed documentation of the history of

⁵⁷ Charles Malamoud, 'The Sacrificial Scene: Remarks on the Rivalry between Myth and Ritual in Vedic India', *ARC, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies*, McGill 28 (2000), p. 39.

this type of magic.⁵⁸ The major phases in the history of this astro-magical type of thought in Judaism are found in Maimonides' descriptions of idolatry, and in some Jewish authors who were more sympathetic to this sort of activity, such as R. Yehudah ha-Levi and Abraham ibn Ezra, and some of the fourteenth-century Jewish Castilian thinkers who combined magic with philosophy and sometimes with Kabbalah as well.⁵⁹

One of the most important exponents of talismanic theory is the Arabic *ghayyat al-hakhim*, known as *Picatrix* in Latin and *takhlit he-hakham* in Hebrew. In the Hebrew version, written presumably late in thirteenth century Castile, it is said that according to Aristotle, 'in ancient times, divine names had the ability to bring spiritual forces down to earth. At times, these forces descend below [...] and it is said that the incantation of the sorcery⁶⁰ will not go beyond the realm of this world'.⁶¹

In a book by R. Shema'yah ben Isaac ha-Levi which was quoted above and is preserved in a manuscript that also includes a copy of R. Nathan's *Sha'arei Sedeq* we read:

There is power and drawing down on all the names [...] because He gave power to the names and supernal drawing down, as is the case of Moses [...] Beṣalel [...] Yehoshu'a [...] David [...] Shlomo [...] Saul [...] Rohobbam [...] Jerobbam

⁵⁸ Shlomo Pines, 'On the Term *Ruhaniyyut* and its Sources and On Judah Halevi's Doctrine', *Tarbiz* 57 (1988), pp. 511–540 (Hebrew). See also his 'Le Sefer ha-Tamar et les Maggidim des Kabalistes', *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, eds. G. Nahon et Ch. Touati, Louvain 1980, pp. 333–363, and 'Shi'ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980), pp. 165–251.

⁵⁹ See Moshe Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations', pp. 204–210 and see more recently the detailed analyses of Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought*, Ramat Gan 1999 (Hebrew); see also Elliot Wolfson, 'Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered', *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 57 (1991), pp. 190–192; Idel, 'Universalization and Integration', pp. 28–30.

⁶⁰ *Lahash ha-kishshuf*.

⁶¹ Ms. München 214, fol. 51a; See also the German translation by H. Ritter and M. Plesner, *Picatrix – Das Ziel des Weisen von Pseudo-Magriti*, London 1962, p. 36. On the importance of this treatise for the understanding of the theory of the *ruhaniyyat* see Pines, *On the Term Ruhaniyyat*, pp. 518–520. See also Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 316 note 96.

[...] Assa [...] and the Tetragrammaton confers power to all the names in the world, but this name is unique to Him.⁶²

According to this kabbalist, there is a process of emanation and drawing down that starts with the Tetragrammaton. Thus, by resorting to divine names, the process of drawing down can be activated. In an interesting passage from Abulafia's *Gan Na'ul*, prophecy is made by combining letters through a technique he learned from the *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah* by R. Isaac of Beziers. This technique includes the attributes of numbers [*middot ha-sefirot*] and seals [*hotamot*] in addition to permutations of letters. The purpose of this technique is to use them to draw down the supernal, divine forces and cause them to dwell here on earth.⁶³ Therefore, the seals here below are able to draw down the supernal powers as part of a prophetic event. In another passage, Abulafia states that

the *sefirot* – depending [one's] comprehension of them, and the force received from them, which depends upon the knowledge of the true names, the power of one prophet will surpass and become greater than the power of another prophet.⁶⁴

In another passage discussing the concept of the seal, Abulafia refers to '*emmet*', which even in the Talmud refers to the seal of God,⁶⁵ as 'speaking to the prophets by the name' [*ba-shem*]. Note that the term used is 'by the name', not by calling the name all the others are called,⁶⁶ but by the name which seals all. Man, who himself is the seal of all the creatures is 'the Man on the throne'⁶⁷ and is the 'secret of the seal'.⁶⁸ The idea of a supernal and a lower seal, or the name and man, suggests that the Agent Intellect, i.e., the seal which seals all, speaks

⁶² *Seror he-Hayyim*, Ms. Leiden, Warner 24, fol. 186b. Compare also to R. Joseph Ashkenazi, *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, p. 137: 'Moshe, Shet, Abel, all are holy names and within them the Tetragrammaton (is found), and they move the (created) entities and generate the souls. Likewise Hiram and Pharaoh and Nebukadnezar, the wicked, and the serpent. And see the question of the staff that has been changed into a serpent, that is the secret of generation and destruction'.

⁶³ Ms. München 58, fol. 335b; The passage was reproduced in *Sefer ha-Peliyah*, I, fol. 80a and will be dealt with in section 4 of this chapter.

⁶⁴ *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana 53, fols. 155b-156a.

⁶⁵ See Idel, *Golem*, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁶ i.e. creatures called by names

⁶⁷ Ezekiel, 1:26.

⁶⁸ *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana 53, fols. 155b-156a.

to the lower seal, man, who is described in the Bible as a seal⁶⁹ through the name, which may also be a seal. I return to the linguistic nature of man and the name as representative of God later on in this chapter.

The term *hotam* (seal) is used to designate the Agent Intellect in writings by Abulafia's student, R. Joseph Gikatilla, who states that God 'places form in all shapeless matter, and by virtue of this the Tenth Intellect, called *'ishim*, whose basis is the name *YHWH*⁷⁰ which is given to him by the natural seal, he is able to portray and give form to shapeless matter'.⁷¹ A similar position is found in a younger contemporary of Gikatilla, who was deeply influenced by him, R. Shema'yah ben Isaac ha-Levi, where Metatron is described as the seal of the king, i.e., God.⁷² Thus Gikatilla not only refers to the Agent Intellect as a seal, but also connects this view, which is found in many medieval philosophical sources,⁷³ to the concept of the divine name. The angel Metatron is described in Abulafia's *'Or ha-Sekhel*, as sealing matter with form and vice-versa.⁷⁴ The various traditions concerning the term *hotam* are brought together in ecstatic Kabbalah; first and foremost in *Sefer Yesirah*, where it refers to the combinations of three letters YHW by which the world has been sealed, and secondly in the *Hekhalot* literature where *hotamot* occur as divine names, in a manner reminiscent of the Talmudic view that *'emmet* is the seal of God. Abulafia was probably familiar with magical traditions dealing with seals and used them to describe the bringing down of the divine powers. The final influence is the Neoaristotelian vision of the seal that associates form and matter. Elsewhere, Abulafia describes Kabbalah as follows:

The purpose of the ways of Kabbalah is the reception of the prophetic, divine and intellectual influx from God, Blessed be He, by means of the Agent

⁶⁹ Ezekiel 28:12.

⁷⁰ *'ishim* = 461 = *Shem YHW*.

⁷¹ *Ginnat Egoz*, fol. 58c (the second folio).

⁷² *Seror he-Hayyim*, Ms. Leiden 24, fols. 199b, 208c.

⁷³ For more references to the Agent Intellect as a seal see Moritz Steinschneider, *Al-Farabi*, St. Petersburg 1869, p. 253, note 2 and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 216-217 note 96.

⁷⁴ Ms. Vatican 233, fol. 17b.

Intellect, and causing the descent and the blessing, by means of the [divine] name, on the individual and on the community.⁷⁵

Abulafia is clearly referring to Maimonides' definition of prophecy in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:36, but however considers the divine name as the main technique for achieving it. What is crucial here for the ecstatic kabbalist is his departure from the philosophical tenor of Maimonides, where the cause of the descent of the spiritual influx is described in a way similar to astro-magical theory. Rather, the kabbalist is not only the recipient of the intellective influx described as a blessing, but also causes its descent by using the divine name. In his letter to R. Yehudah Salmon of Barcelona Abulafia wrote:

All the inner forces and the hidden souls in man are differentiated in the[ir] bodies. In fact, when their knots are loosened, the essence of each and every force and soul will run to their prime source, which is one without any duality, which comprises all multiplicity ad infinitum. This loosening reaches up to the highest [degree] so that when someone pronounces there the [divine] name it ascends and rests on the head of the supernal crown and the thought draws a threefold blessing from there [...] thus the person who utters the name draws the blessing from above and he pulls it down⁷⁶

These passages show that the technical use of the divine names to purify the consciousness of the mystic is not the only role names play in the mystical experience. The supernal divine powers are funneled by the recitation, and the mystic experiences the spiritual or intellectual entity attracted or captured in the pronounced name. This strengthens the argument for an affinity between technique and experience. The quote above not only demonstrates this affinity, but in fact in its various interpretations the technique and the experience almost coalesce. The verbal nature of Abulafia's technique – pronunciation of letters and names – creates a presence of the divine within the name. Some texts describe this presence as revelatory – the names speak to the prophet. Activation of the mouth creates a reaction paralleling the type of technique, and

⁷⁵ *Shomer Miṣvah*, Ms. Paris BN 853, fol. 48b. On this talismanic view of Kabbalah, which assumes both mystical and magical aspects see the discussion of the mystico-magical model as expounded in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 103-145.

⁷⁶ Ms. New York, JTSA 1887, fols. 99b-100a; *Ve-Zot li-Yehudah*, pp. 20-21; Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 131; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 132; Idel, 'Universalization and Integration', p. 37, W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, London 1961, p. 116. On the concept of blessing see also the anonymous treatise from the school of Abraham Abulafia, *Ner 'Elohim*, Ms. München 10, fols. 129b-130a.

speech emerges, whether actual or imaginary. According to Abulafia and his student R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar, the ecstatic kabbalist can have an experience in which the mystic's own mouth utters the revelation.

In Abulafia's major mystical handbook, *'Or ha-Sekhel*, he describes the process of pronunciation of the letters of the Divine Name: 'then play the *hiriq* which extends downwards and [it] draws downwards the supernal force in order to cause it to cleave to you'.⁷⁷ Here, Abulafia explicitly states that his technique is intended to collect or attract the spiritual forces into the person who permutes the letters. The precise nature of this supernal force is not clear; however, it may be connected to astral bodies or to *sefirot* as numbers, though this is not a necessary interpretation. We shall return to this topic below in section 4.

One of the clearest examples of the presence of the divine within the mystic's utterances is found in another handbook where Abulafia describes a mystical technique:

Direct *your* face towards the Name which is mentioned, and sit as though a man is standing before you and waiting for *you* to speak with Him, and He is ready to answer whatever *you* may ask him, and you say 'speak' and he answers [...] And then begin to pronounce, and recite first 'the head of the head' [i.e., the first combination of letters], drawing out your breath and at great ease; and afterwards go back as though the one opposite you is answering *you*, and *you* yourself answer, changing *your* voice, so that the answer is not similar to the question. And do not extend the answer at all, but say it easily and calmly, and in response recite one letter of the Name as it actually is.⁷⁸

The answer to the question is thought to come from the supernal realm, but it is uttered by the mystic's voice. This seems to be one of Abulafia's interpretations of the divine response to the mystic's appeal when using the mystical technique.⁷⁹ The passage seems to suggest that the human voice draws down a supernal power and gives expression to its presence by it voice.⁸⁰

Another ecstatic kabbalist, R. Isaac ben Shmuel of Acre, asserted that the mystic should 'live a life of suffering in your house of solitude' in order to

⁷⁷ Ms. Vatican 233, fol. 11ob. On the significance of this text see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 62–53.

⁷⁸ Ms. New York JTS 1801, fol. 9a, corrected according to Ms. British Library 749, fol. 12ab.

⁷⁹ See more on this issue Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 86–95.

⁸⁰ See more on this issue in chapter 4.

deserve 'to draw down into your intellective soul the influx of the Godhead⁸¹ and in the Torah, that is to say, in the wisdom of combination and its prerequisites'.⁸² It is obvious that combinations of letters are instrumental in drawing down supernal influx as part of a mystical path. Finally, in a passage in *Pardes Rimmonim*, Cordovero refers to an earlier concept of drawing down the supernal efflux, again using the divine names:

Some of the ancients commented that by the combination and permutation of the Name of seventy-two [letters] or other [divine] names, after a great concentration [of mind], the righteous man, who is worthy and enlightened in such matters will have a portion of the divine voice [*bat qol*] revealed to him, in the sense that 'The spirit of God spoke to me, and his words were on my lips'.⁸³ For he combines the forces and unites them and arouses desires in them, each to his brother as the *membrum virile* of man and his companion [i.e. the female] until there is poured a great influx upon him, with the condition that he who deals with this will be a well-prepared vessel and worthy of receiving the spiritual force. For if it is not the case, it would be cruel to be turned into a 'degenerate wild vine'.⁸⁴

The combination of letters most likely enhances the influx that is drawn down. Cordovero's passage combines the practices of *hitbodedut* and combinations of the letters of the name of 72 letters, a combination that is highly characteristic of ecstatic Kabbalah. Nevertheless, theurgical elements are also involved here. It is noteworthy that the practice of combining divine names, one that involves recitation, generates a verbal phenomenon: the *bat qol*, confirming again the affinity between the nature of the technique and the type of experience.

3. SEEING THE LETTERS OF A DIVINE NAME

In Abulafia's mystical technique letters are permuted in written form, orally, and mentally. In most instances, the ecstatic kabbalists only describe the first two stages of this process of reciting letters; the convergence between the recitation of the various combinations of letters of divine names and other

⁸¹ *Shefa' ha-'Elohot*.

⁸² 'Oṣar Hayyim, Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 775, fol. 17ob. More on this passage see chapter 3.

⁸³ II Samuel, 23:2. Jeremiah 2:21.

⁸⁴ *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 30, ch. 3; part II, fol. 69b.

letters of the alphabet is discussed elsewhere.⁸⁵ These two phases constitute crucial components of the ecstatic technique, judging by the details related to recitation found in Abulafia's books, such as a defined rhythm of recitation and the vision of the vowels as musical notes.⁸⁶ Further, the visions of the letters of the divine names are part of a revelation occurring after using the names as components of a mystical technique that also involves activities that are related to written documents.

The utterance of names and seals, mentioned in the passage from Abulafia's letter to a rabbi in Barcelona quoted above, can be attributed to any of the numerous divine names. However, in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* Abulafia writes explicitly about the encounter between the mystic and letters of the holy names, including the name of seventy-two letters envisioned as angels, and the conversation between them:

You are already prepared to receive the influx, and the influx is emanating upon you and raises you to many things, one after another. Prepare your true thought to imagine God, blessed be He, and the supernal angels, and imagine them in your heart as though they are men standing or sitting around you and you are amidst them like an emissary that the king and his servants want to send, and he is prepared to listen to the content of the message from their mouth, either from the king or from one of his servants.⁸⁷ After you have imagined this entire event, prepare your intellect and heart to understand your thoughts, [in other words] the numerous matters that come to you, the intellectual letters⁸⁸ that are in your heart, or the deeds, and inquire into them in general or in their parts as in the case of a man that is told a parable or an enigma or a dream, or inquire into a book of wisdom dealing with a deep issue, and [you] will hear a perfect interpretation, and bring it closer as much as you can.⁸⁹

The visualization of the letters is followed by a process of understanding that

⁸⁵ See Idel, *Le porte della Giustizia*, pp. 130-143.

⁸⁶ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 53.71.

⁸⁷ On the creation of images as part of the revelatory process see in the same book, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fol. 59a.

⁸⁸ On 'intellectual letters' see more below, section 4. See also R. Nathan, *Sha'arei Sedeq*, p. 22.

⁸⁹ Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fol. 52ab. This passage was quoted with a few changes by R. Yehudah Albotini in his *Sullam ha-'Aliyah*, ed. J.E. Porush, Jerusalem 1989, p. 73, analyzed in Idel, *Le porte della Giustizia*, pp. 276-286. See Ibid., pp. 81-86. On contemplating the letters of the name in Abulafia see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 56, 167-168.

involves the human intellect. According to Maimonides these two human powers are part of the prophetic event and Abulafia returns constantly to this topic. Abulafia refers to active imagination, which creates a vision out of the linguistic components of the technique. This is the case in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* where the letters of the holy name of seventy-two letters appear before the eyes of the mystic as do the angels. After a standard explanation of how this name emerges from three verses in Exodus 14:19-21 Abulafia advises:

Behold this sublime name, written in an explicit manner, [whose letters are] combined in an appropriate way [...] and whoever knows how to permute it in an adequate manner, the divine spirit will certainly clothe him or the influx of wisdom will emanate upon him, and guide his intellect to the essence of reality in a sudden manner⁹⁰ [...] and all these names are combined here, in order to explain the secrets of these seventy-two letters, from which the life of the world-to-come is attained by those who prophesize, and this is the reason this book is called *The Life of the World to Come*.⁹¹

The guidance of the intellect by the holy spirit can be seen in a more intellectual manner that could suggest the impact of Maimonides' gnoseology: a supernal intellect, the holy spirit as the influx, illuminates the human intellect. However, analysis needs to take into account the processes where linguistic metaphors are used. Elsewhere in the same book Abulafia describes the letters as part of the revelatory experience:

The letters are without doubt the root of all wisdom and knowledge, and they are themselves the contents of prophecy, and they appear in the prophetic vision as though [they are] opaque bodies speaking to man face to face [saying] most of the intellective understandings, thought in the heart of the one speaking them. And they appear as though pure living angels are moving them about and teaching them to man, who turns them about in the form of wheels in the air, flying with their wings, and they are spirit within spirit. And at times the person sees them as though they are resting in the hills and flying away from them, and that mountain which the person sees them dwelling upon or moving from was sanctified by the prophet who sees them, and it is right and proper that he call them holy, because 'God has descended upon them in fire',⁹² and in the holy mountain there is a holy spirit. And the name of the holy high

⁹⁰ On this motif see Idel, *Le porte della Giustizia*, p. 231 note 4.

⁹¹ Ms. Paris BN 777, fol. 108a-109a.

⁹² Exodus 19:18.

mountain is the Ineffable Name, and know this, and the RYW⁹³ and secret of the mountain is *Gevurah*,⁹⁴ and he is the Mighty One, who wages war against the enemies of God who forget His Name. And behold, after this the letters are corporealized in the form of the Ministering Angels who know the labor of singing, and these are the Levites, who are in the form of God, who give birth to a voice of joy and ringing song, and teach with their voice matters of the future and new ways, and renew the knowledge of prophecy.⁹⁵

The motif of the revelation on a mountain is a familiar one in religion.⁹⁶ The mountain is, needless to say, reminiscent of the process of revelation, though in this passage this revelation does not take place in a certain special space but within human consciousness. The size of the letters may have something to do with a change in the mystic's consciousness, but also with the vision of the voices at the Sinaitic revelation. In some cases, the ecstatic kabbalists do not refer to a purely internalized revelation on an inner mountain, which is an allegory for a spiritual faculty, or mention a simple reiteration of the spatial scene of the Sinaitic revelation. Rather they refer to an imaginary event, but not an 'imaginal' one, to use Corbin's nomenclature. The kabbalist does not encounter the realm of the imaginal, '*alam al-mithal*', as presupposed by some Sufi traditions, but is either affected by a physical phenomenon, some form of dilatation of the objects that one concentrates on, or he creates the mountain and the letters through the imagination. This distinction between the positions of the ecstatic kabbalists and the Sufis is even more necessary given that at least two of the kabbalists to be mentioned immediately below, R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah and the preserver of some of his teachings R. Isaac of Acre, were certainly acquainted with the Sufi theory of *mundus imaginalis*.⁹⁷ The very same letters that constitute the core of the technique grow larger as this technique reaches its endpoint. This motif is also found in a small treatise written at the end of the thirteenth century in Messina by a follower of Abulafia, R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar:

⁹³ i.e. 216.

⁹⁴ Might. *Gevurah* in *gematriah* equals 216.

⁹⁵ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford Bodleiana 1582, fol. 59ab

⁹⁶ See the study by R. C. Zaehner, 'Standing on the Peak', *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, Jerusalem 1967, pp. 381-387; Marie Madeleine Davy, *La montagne et sa symbolique*, Paris 1996.

⁹⁷ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 73-89.

I set out to take up the Great Name of God, consisting of seventy-two names, permuting and combining it. But when I had done this for a little while, behold, the letters took on in my eyes the shape of great mountains, to speak parabolically.⁹⁸

The letters of the so-called name of 72 letters are described as aggrandizing themselves. This vision is part of the mystical path that also includes other stages. The same letters that serve as a major component of the technique become part of the experience. As was the case in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* the visible form of letters in the imagination of the mystic constitutes the content of the vision.

In the mystical path described in R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah's *Sha'arei Sedeq* the first stage consists of a phenomenon of body-photism, then the mystic moves to speculation, then to imparting these speculations to others, and finally to prophecy. The mystical path thus gradually develops more articulated forms of revelation, implying a shift from a visual experience to verbal messages. In all of these the human body plays a key role, which is at its most obvious in the last phase when the feeling of being anointed is related to the mystic's body. It is as though the human body prepares itself by the techniques to be appropriated by different divine aspects, even as it weakens. God takes possession of the body to the extent that the body opens itself to the divine presence, by resorting to gradually more divine forms of letter combinations. In short, the anomian technique of letter-combinations induces the divine presence in the mystic's body. This talismanic view is presented clearly in the introduction to R. Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'arei 'Orah*, but in this case is achieved by a nomian technique: the fulfillment of the commandments. According to Gikatilla, man is created in the Supernal Image, and each and every limb may become a 'seat' for the Supernal entity, to which it corresponds through its purification and fulfillment of the commandments.⁹⁹ A disciple of R. Nathan Harar, the more famous and influential kabbalist R. Isaac of Acre wrote in a widely-read book:

I, Isaac the young, the son of Samuel, of Acre, may it speedily be rebuilt, say [as follows], to the elite as well as to the vulgus: that whoever wishes to know the secret of attaching one's soul above and cleaving one's thought to Almighty God, so that one may acquire the World to Come with that same constant thought, without interruption, and God will always be with him, in this [world]

⁹⁸ Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 478-479.

⁹⁹ *Sha'arei 'Orah*, ed. Ben Shelomo, I, pp. 49-50.

and the next. Let him place before his eyes and his thought the letters of the Ineffable Name, as if they were written before him in a book, in Assyrian writing, and let him visualize each letter before his eyes as great, without limits. I mean by this to say that when you envision the letters of the Ineffable Name before your eyes, [imaginatively] put your mind's eye on them but the thought of your heart be on the Infinite [*Ein Sof*], [the envisioning and the thought] both concomitantly. And this is the true cleaving of which Scripture said, 'to cleave to Him',¹⁰⁰ and to Him shall you cleave',¹⁰¹ 'and you who cleave',¹⁰² etc. And so long as the soul of man cleaves to the Name, may He be blessed, no evil shall befall you, and you shall come to no wrong in any matter, either intellective or sensory and you will not fall into the hand of chance, for so long as one is cleaving to God, may He be blessed, he is above all chance and rules over them.¹⁰³

Contemplating the divine name is a well-known technique, which is insufficiently researched. Its major variant is the contemplation of the written form of the letters of this name, a technique that had important repercussions in Polish Hasidism. Here, however, we are concerned with the shift from the letters in their normal size to their larger sizes later on. The letters are not written in front of the person meditating; rather he imagines them, and at a certain moment their shape is aggrandized. In other words, the technique of Abulafia and his disciples also had a strong visual layer that culminated in a vision of the same letters in a larger size. This is, presumably, the result of the acceleration of eye movements as part of the technique. Greater involvement of the visual sense as part of the technique culminates in a visual vision. Weeping may induce a vision of the sad *Shekhinah*.¹⁰⁴ From the point of view of the sociology of Kabbalah, it is important that this technique was recommended to both the learned and the ignorant. It may one of the first instances of mystical instruction based upon a clear kabbalistic framework to ordinary people who are encouraged to achieve the experience of cleaving to the divine via the divine name.

¹⁰⁰ Deut. 11:22.

¹⁰¹ Deut. 10:20.

¹⁰² Deut. 4:4.

¹⁰³ *Me'irat Ein zyyim*, ed. Goldreich, p. 217; see also Gottlieb, *Studies in Kabbalah Literature*, p. 235 (Hebrew). For more on R. Isaac contemplating the divine names see Idel, *Le porte della Giustizia*, pp. 144-163.

¹⁰⁴ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 75-88.

4. LANGUAGE, INTELLECT AND QUESTIONS OF CONTINUA

As mentioned above, there is congruence between the divine realm, the descending linguistic continua and the ascending mystical techniques. The focus here is on ascending mystical techniques. One example can be seen in the letters of Abraham Abulafia:

Man can cleave to each and every *sefirah* by the essence of the influx expanding from its emanation on his [own] *sefirot*,¹⁰⁵ which are his attributes [...] ¹⁰⁶ And it is necessary to mentally concentrate [in order to attain] an apprehension, until the expert kabbalist will attain from them an influx of which he is aware. This is so, given the fact that the written letters are like bodies, and the pronounced letters are spiritual [by nature] and the mental [letters] are intellectual and the emanated [letters] are divine [...] and out of [his] concentration¹⁰⁷ – to prepare the power of the bride to receive the influx from the power of the bridegroom, the divine [letters] – will move the intellectual ones and because of the sustained concentration and its greatness and power, and the great desire [of the kabbalist] and his forcible longing and his intense desire to attain the *devequt* and the Kiss¹⁰⁸ the power of the bride;¹⁰⁹ and her name and her essence, will be positively known¹¹⁰ and preserved for eternity, since they were found righteous, and the separated [entities] will be united¹¹¹ and the united ones will be separated and the reality is transformed, and as a consequence, every branch will return to its root and will be united with it and all spiritual [entities] [will return] to its essence and will be linked to it,¹¹² ‘and the Tabernacle will become one’,¹¹³ ‘and the Tetragrammaton [or God] will be the King of the entire world, and on that day, the Tetragrammaton will be one and His Name one’, and if he will do so to the order of the *sefirot* and the

¹⁰⁵ Abulafia’s assumption is that there are *sefirot* in man. See Ibid., pp. 147-149.

¹⁰⁶ The attributes of man.

¹⁰⁷ *Lehitboded*. In many texts especially in ecstatic Kabbalah, this verb means mental concentration, though in many other instances it stands for corporeal solitude. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 108-111.

¹⁰⁸ This is a metaphor for the union between the human and the divine intellects. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 180-184, Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God*, Seattle 1994, pp. 39-44.

¹⁰⁹ The human intellect.

¹¹⁰ See above the discussion about God knowing Moses by his name.

¹¹¹ The spiritual entities, the human and the divine intellect, which are united during the experience.

¹¹² Exod. 26:6.

¹¹³ Zech. 14:9.

structure of twenty-two letters, ‘and join them one to the other to make one staff, and they shall become one in thy hands’^{114, 115}

Abulafia is alluding to the union between the corporeal and the spiritual that is dissolved during the mystical experience. When he uses the phrase *tithaphekha-mesiy'ut*, (reality is transformed), he means that the inner, human reality is transformed by the mystical experience. The separation of mind from body lays the groundwork for the union of the human mind with the agent intellect, which presumes a radical transformation. This transformation is closely related to a series of ascending letters from the written, the vocal, the intellectual, to the divine. The human *sefirot*, i.e. human qualities, correspond to supernal ones and are the recipient of the latter's emanations. The letters presumably connect these two realms, and both the human and the supernal *sefirot* should be understood in linguistic terms. As seen above, at least in the case of the agent intellect, Abulafia used linguistic descriptions such as primordial speech. Moreover, in Abulafia the ten *sefirot* are often connected to letters: for instance the numerical value of a letter is its *sefirah*. This interpretation of the term *sefirah* existed in ancient times and was how R. Abraham ibn Ezra used the term.¹¹⁶ In any case, there is an interesting parallel with Abulafia. Elsewhere in the same book we learn about the *sefirot*:

All the lower entities are linked to the higher and the higher are linked to the higher of the highest. Any high entity is linked and depends upon the entity higher than it is, and the higher is [linked] to the highest until it reaches the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two supernal letters, the inner aspect of the inner, higher than the four living entities which are divine attributes¹¹⁷ [...] The beginning of perfect belief is that it is worthwhile to believe that the *sefirot* are the beginning of all that God, blessed be He, innovated and the divine name embraces them all together, and this is, according to the words of all the prophets, the Glory. And indeed the peak of the human comprehension of the *sefirot* is according to the names linked by the known divine name of four holy letters.¹¹⁸

This passage, as some other parts of the letter, is part of a debate with an unnamed theosophical kabbalist, who is presented as believing in the *sefirot*

¹¹⁴ Ezek.37:17.

¹¹⁵ *Masref la-K̲zef*, Ms. Sasson 56, fol. 33a. See also Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 230-231.

¹¹⁶ The phrase *Hakhmei ha-Sefirah* means mathematicians in his writings; see his *Short Commentary on Exodus* 23:20.

¹¹⁷ See also the introductory poem of the letter. Ms. Sasson 56, fol. 24b.

¹¹⁸ *Masref la-K̲zef*, Ms. Sasson 56, fol. 28a.

without being adequately initiated into the divine names related to them. In this context, Abulafia stresses the importance of the divine names, which are derived, in one way or another, from the Tetragrammaton. The above passage is not entirely transparent and it needs a fuller analysis. Nevertheless I would venture to point out the possible affinities between it and the view of Abulafia's student, R. Joseph Gikatilla in his *Sha'arei 'Orah*, especially in the introduction to the book, where the importance of the divine names and their relationship to the *sefirot* on the one hand and to the Tetragrammaton on the other is described as quintessential. In a manner reminiscent of Proclus' understanding of the names as referring primarily to supernal beings and only analogically to their lower extensions, Gikatilla, too, applies anthropomorphic terms to God's attributes.¹¹⁹ In any case the passage contains two elements that require more complete examination. One is the existence of supernal letters that serve as the scaffold for the lower realms of being. The second is the strong emphasis on the dependence of the lower realm on the higher. I assume that this dependence also includes the reception of the influx by the lower from the higher by means of the names of the *sefirot*, as we learn from another book of Abulafia's where he describes this process as follows:

The recipient of the names of the *sefirot* should make an effort to receive the divine influx from them themselves, in accordance with his attributes. And he should cleave to each *sefirah* and *sefirah* separately and he should integrate his cleaving with all the *sefirot* together, and not separate the branches.¹²⁰

The term 'names of *sefirot*' – names, not just metaphysical entities – are involved in the process of receiving the influx from above. This interpretation strengthens the passage from the other letter quoted above concerning the drawing down of the blessing by means of the divine name.

The preparation of the human spiritual capacity to receive the supernal influx is achieved by cleansing it through use of language. Elevating it to the state of intellectual letters is tantamount to preparing the intellectual capacity to receive the divine letters, which are emanated to the human intellect. This addition of the higher on the lower also implies the adherence of the lower to the higher and the completion of a unity, which is hinted at by the presentation of the concepts of *sefirot* and letters respectively standing for the divine and the human. The unification of the Tetragrammaton to the divine name should be

¹¹⁹ *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, pp. 219–220.

¹²⁰ *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, Ms. British Library, OR 13136, fol. 3a.

understood as the union of the two Tetragrammata, whose numerical valence is $13 + 13 = 26$; i.e. twice 'eħad (one) – a view that is also discussed elsewhere as an allegory for the experience of a mystical union.¹²¹ As in many other cases, the lower entity is depicted as a bride who is united erotically with the supernal intellect, the bridegroom.¹²²

This ascending movement, where human capacity is elevated to the status of the intellectual is coupled to the descending movement, where the divine letters enter the intellectual ones and trigger processes taking place there. This process is related to the transformation of a divine super-intellectual message into a more elaborated message – either written or oral – that Abulafia considers prophecy. Thus the mystical ascending technique propels man on high and creates the reverse movement through which a divine language is embodied in lower forms of expression. To express this process in a different way: the mystical techniques as represented in ecstatic Kabbalah deconstruct ordinary language by combining letters to dissolve the normal perception of reality, purely for the sake of preparing the human mind to receive a trans-intellectual message that is then transformed into an intellectual one, and finally into formulated oral or written linguistic messages.

My interpretation of the text assumes the importance of the phenomenon of prophecy in Abulafia in general, and also in this particular case, though here this issue is not mentioned. However, the manner in which the most sublime form of letters is designated as both divine and emanated deserves further analysis. In some forms of medieval gnoseology stemming from Avicenna's writings, there was a type of intellect higher than the intellect in *actu*, but lower than the agent intellect: this intellect was known as the prophetic intellect, emanated intellect, or divine intellect. It is the mode of revelation characteristic of religion.¹²³ This position was taken by a few kabbalists to refer to the manner

¹²¹ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 66–67, 70 note 13.

¹²² Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 185–190.

¹²³ R. Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera, *Sefer ha-Ma'ilot*, ed. L. Venetianer, Berlin 1894, p. 21; idem, *Sefer Moreh ha-Moreh*, ed. M.L. Bisliches, Pressburg 1837, pp. 19, 145. See also Falaquera's, *Sefer ha-Nefesh*, p. 24. On this thinker see the important monograph by Raphael Jospe, *Torah and Sophia, The Life and Thought of Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera*, Cincinnati 1988, especially pp. 257–258 for the passages translated here and their sources in Avicenna's thought; 'Amirah 'Eran, 'The View of Hads in R. Yehudah ha-Levi and Maimonides', *Tura* 4 (1996), pp. 117–146 (Hebrew); Dov Schwartz, 'The Quadripartite Division of the Intellect in Medieval Jewish Thought', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 84 (1993/1994), pp. 231–232.

in which Kabbalah was revealed; these kabbalists refer to a prophetic intellect.¹²⁴ I assume that what we have in Abulafia's letter is a transformation of the divine intellect into divine letters. In any case, the crucial feature is that some letters are higher than the intellectual letters; they are both divine and emanated, and only then become intellectual letters. This position is reminiscent of some features of the Hasidic theory on a realm of being that is found before the intellect, *qadmut ha-sekhel*, a concept found in traditions attributed to the eighteenth century Great Maggid of Medzerich. He identified this concept with the *sefiroh* of *Hokhmah*, which emanates the twenty-two letters to the *sefiroh* of *Binah*, the attribute of thought or intellection.¹²⁵ Abulafia's discussion is certainly not the source of the Hasidic view, but it testifies to the existence of a mode of thought that could, by being assimilated to the sefirotic system, generate the Hasidic view.

I now turn to a second feature of the sequence of letters discussed above. Abulafia uses the term 'intellectual letters' as the highest human form of letters, lower only than the divine ones. There can be no doubt that Abulafia built his ladder of letters, the written, the verbal and the intellectual, on the well-known ancient and medieval triad of thought, words and deeds.¹²⁶ The highest letters therefore represent the mode of existence of letters in a specific human capacity, thought. This vision is corroborated by Abulafia's three modes of concretization of the combinations of letters as part of his mystical path – the written, the oral and the mental.¹²⁷ According to the Aristotelian taxonomy, the status of a thing in thought is the highest, and Abulafia also adopts this view in the case of letters. Thus, his ascending path follows a mode of thinking shaped by Aristotelian thought, assigning the intellectual letters the role of establishing the nexus between the human and the divine. Abulafia's statement: 'Whoever cleaves to the name cleaves to God' is crucial.¹²⁸ In the same context the forefathers are described as 'those who cleave to the name'.¹²⁹ This is the core of an important passage by one of Abulafia's disciples, the young R. Joseph Gikatilla. In his *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud*, he writes:

¹²⁴ See, e.g., Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fols. 11b, 12a; and the anonymous treatise found in Ms. New York, JTS 1805, fol. 26a.

¹²⁵ See G. Scholem, 'The Unconscious and the Concept of *Qadmut ha-Sekhel* in Hasidic Literature', reprinted in *Devarim be-Go*, Tel Aviv 1976, pp. 351–360 (Hebrew).

¹²⁶ See note 86 above.

¹²⁷ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 20.

¹²⁸ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fol. 21b.

¹²⁹ Ibid. See the discussion above on R. Shema'yah ben Isaac ha-Levi's view.

The letters of the Tetragrammaton, blessed be He, are all of them intellectual, not sensuous letters, and they point to an existence and to a lasting thing and to every entity in the world, and this is the secret meaning of 'and thou who cleave to the Tetragrammaton¹³⁰ your God shall be alive today',¹³¹ namely that those who cleave to the letters of the Tetragrammaton exist and last forever.¹³²

Again, the letters of the divine name are crucial for the mystical path, because they induce the union between the human and the divine. As in the case of Abulafia, the letters are described as intellectual. The instruction to cleave to these letters is straightforward; it represents on the one hand part of the mystical path of ecstatic Kabbalah and, on the other, it played an important role in the Hasidic *via mystica* as formulated by R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. The founder of Hasidism is quoted in the writing of one of his acquaintances and companions, R. Meir Harif Margoliot of Ostrog, to the effect that:

Whoever prepares himself to study for its own sake,¹³³ without any alien intention [...] let his desirable intention concerning study for its own sake be to cleave himself in holiness and purity to the letters, *in potentia* and *in adu*, in speech and in thought, [so that he will] link part of [his] [lower] soul, spirit, [higher] soul, *hayah* and *yehidah* to the holiness of the 'candle of the commandment and Torah [is light]',¹³⁴ [to] the enlightening letters, which cause the emanation of the influx of lights and vitality, that are true and eternal.¹³⁵

This passage attracted the attention of many scholars who were inclined to view it as an innovation of the Besht.¹³⁶ Some features of this passage can be related to the tradition of ecstatic Kabbalah, as was seen above concerning medieval texts. Unlike the ecstatic kabbalists who used divine names as part of their mystical techniques, the Besht was concerned (adopting theories found in

¹³⁰ The original meaning in the Bible is 'to the Lord'.

¹³¹ Deut. 4:4.

¹³² Printed in 'Arzei Levanon, Venice 1601, fol. 38a; See also Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 109.

¹³³ Literally, for its name.

¹³⁴ Proverbs 6:23.

¹³⁵ *Sod Yakhin u-Vo'az*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 41-42.

¹³⁶ See more in: Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, pp. 211, 213; Weiss, *Studies*, p. 59; Idem, 'Talmud Torah le-Shi'at R. Israel Besht', *Essays Presented to the Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie Israel*, London 1967, pp. 162-167 (Hebrew part); Haviva Pedaya, 'The Besht, R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, and the Maggid of Medzerich: Basic Lines for a Religious-Typological Approach', *Daat* 45 (2000), pp. 58-59 (Hebrew).

particular in R. Moses Cordovero's writings) with the Hebrew letters in general. This cleaving is part of a nomian technique; i.e., one which uses the normal religious practices in Judaism – prayer and Torah study – as mystical vehicles. These important divergences notwithstanding, the main contention of Margoliot's passage is that the ultimate mystical event consists of an adherence to letters. However, this cleaving is related, as in the case of Abulafia and many other kabbalists following him or those with parallel views, to letters that can draw down the supernal influx. Thus, the Hebrew letters found in canonical writings are part of an ascending technique involving the act of cleaving, and a descending movement involving the drawing down of the influx.

5. HASIDEI ASHKENAZ: THE DIVINE NAME ONTO MAN

As mentioned earlier, there are affinities between Abraham Abulafia's use of divine names to achieve prophetic experience, and Ashkenazi sources which preceded him. The centrality of the theories of divine names in these sources in general has yet to be fully analyzed. Here, I would like to address another theme found in the writings of the Ashkenazi masters which reverberated in some kabbalistic writings, namely that the presence of the divine name in man constitutes his image and is the vital component that guarantees his existence. In a Talmudic passage that can serve as the starting point, it is said that God, wishing to preserve Israel, which is described as a small key, added a chain (*shalshelet*), to it and this chain is the great name of God. This name ensures that Israel will remain alive among the nations.¹³⁷ Although the connection between life, the great name and the chain is explicit, it is unrelated to the Great Chain of Being. Presumably following this rabbinic discussion, or possibly other Midrashic views related to the divine image, R. Eleazar of Worms wrote early in the thirteenth century that:

a man who will [is about to] die, has no shadow, as it is written¹³⁸ 'The Tetragrammaton¹³⁹ upon them – [then] they will live'. This is why it is written:¹⁴⁰ '*Yismehu ha-shamayim we-tagel ha-'ares*'. – the acronym is *YHWH* and the

¹³⁷ Palestinian Talmud, *Ta'anit*, ch. 2, fol. 11a; *Yalqut Shimoni*, on Joshua, §17. See also Elqayam, 'Ereš ha-Şevi', pp. 158, 105.

¹³⁸ Isaiah 38:16. Compare to the view found in the book of I Samuel, in the verse quoted below.

¹³⁹ In the commonly found text the name is 'Adonai.

¹⁴⁰ Psalm 96:11; I Chronicles 16:31.

last letters[of the verse] are *SaLMW*. When the [divine] name¹⁴¹ is on their head,¹⁴² then *SaLMW* exists, as it is written¹⁴³ 'YHWH sar me-'aleikha' and it is [also] written:¹⁴⁴ 'Sar şilam me'aleihem ve-YHWH 'itanu'. This is clear on the night of *Hosha'na' Rabbah*, when the future of water is decided upon.¹⁴⁵

The uniqueness of the human shadow, *sel*, in this passage is its relationship to the concept of *selem*, the image of man, which is apparently connected not only to his shadowy shape, but also to the divine name. While the various concepts of *selem* have received ample treatment in modern scholarship,¹⁴⁶ the idea that *selem* is related to the divine name has been neglected. I would like to address this meaning of the term here. In his *Hilkhot ha-Nevu'ah* R. Eleazar of Worms indicates, in what is a paraphrase of the ideas found in the previous quote, that:

Just as the name [of God] is [found] on the angel,¹⁴⁷ so also the *tefillin* [are found] on the hand and, likewise, on the head; 'And with the shadow of my hands I have covered you'.¹⁴⁸ He safeguards the righteous, so that the prophet sees, so that he may know who was upon me,¹⁴⁹ and who safeguards me by means of the shadow of his hand. This is just as it is now, on the night of *Hosha'na' Rabbah*: whoever has a shadow will live, but whoever has no shadow, and his head is small, without a neck, he will die within the same year,

¹⁴¹ *Ha-shem*. As the term may stand for both God and the divine name, from the context I conjecture that it is the divine name that is intended here.

¹⁴² See also *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, p. 25, where it is written, in what I consider to be the better version of Ms. Parma, de Rossi 1390, fol. 48a, 'God is on the head'.

¹⁴³ I Sam 28:16.

¹⁴⁴ Numbers 14:9

¹⁴⁵ *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ See the analysis of Scholem, *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, pp. 251-273; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 2, pp. 770-773; Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, pp. 224-229, 247, 248; Idel, *Golem*, pp. 285-295; idem, 'Gazing at the Head', pp. 279-280.

¹⁴⁷ See note 44 above.

¹⁴⁸ Isaiah 51:16.

¹⁴⁹ According to Ms. Parma, de Rossi 1390: *Mi she-hayah 'alai*. If this version is the correct one, an issue that is not self-evident, then we have here a rare confession in the first person of a mystical experience; for a similar statement see R. Eleazar's passage from *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, cited and discussed in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 17. On the broader issue of whether the Hasidei Ashkenaz literature was a theological or a mystical one see, e.g., Ibid., pp. 16-17; Idel *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 27, 91-92, 98, and 323 note 17; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 190-192.

since He then decides in relation to [the amount of] water [of that year]. And¹⁵⁰ the prophet sees the glory, that has been created in order that he will see in accordance with the divine will.¹⁵¹

The Hebrew word *sel* in the Bible stands not only for shadow but also for protection, and this meaning is also found in Assyrian sources.¹⁵² However in the passage by R. Eleazar, the affinity between the two concepts is highly apparent. The ‘proof’ for the connection between *şalmo* and the Tetragrammaton, by referring to the first and last letters of certain words in a verse from Psalm 96, is not an incidental remark, made ad hoc in order to strengthen the link between the *şelem* and the divine name; R. Eleazar also refers to the same verse from Psalms in his *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh* to describe how the divine name hovers over the *şelem*, which now is not over the head of man but in the supernal world, together with all the other archetypal images of all existent beings.¹⁵³ The removal of the protective shadow, which has a shape, is suggested by the verse ‘sar *şilam* me-‘aleihem’. While in the original biblical Hebrew the term *sel* means, in this specific context, protection, and this is also the way it is still understood in some of the texts that deal with the ritual of *Hosha‘na’ Rabbah* – another meaning is added to this verse here. The removal of the divine image, the *şelem*, causes, or leads to the death of the person. Thus, the construed form *şilam*, meaning ‘shadow’ plus the third person plural possessive suffix is amended to yield ‘their protection’, by using a different vocalization of the same three consonants, like the noun *şelem*. This deliberate misreading, or perhaps misinterpretation, may indicate that the *şelem* was thought to be separable from the human body in earlier texts. This means that the *şelem* is not the external form of the body alone; i.e. the shape does not leave at the moment of death, nor as a totally invisible entity, as is the case in

¹⁵⁰ The following sentences appear frequently in the writings of R. Eleazar. See e.g. *Hilkhot Nevu‘ah*, Ms. Parma, de Rossi 1390, fol. 77a.

¹⁵¹ *Sodei Razzaya*, *Hilkhot Nevu‘ah*, ed. Israel Kamhilar, Jerusalem 1936, p. 49 corrected, in some cases, according to Ms. Parma, de Rossi 1390, fol. 76b; The version of this manuscript, copied in 1286 in Italy, also includes some errors, which have not been indicated here; see also Y. D. Wilhelm, ‘*Sidrei Tiqqunim*’, ‘*Alei ‘Ain: Schocken Jubilee Volume*’, Jerusalem 1953, p. 134 (Hebrew); on other partial parallels to this view, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 197–198.

¹⁵² See Leo Oppenheim, ‘The Shadow of the King’, *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 107 (1947), pp. 7–11; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 173–181.

¹⁵³ See pp. 64, 103.

some of Philo's, Origen's or Maimonides's interpretations of the term *šelem*. In this case it possesses a shape but it can nevertheless leave the body. However, according to R. Eleazar of Worms *šelem* is still connected to God: it is in fact His mode of revelation, both in the form of a divine name upon man and, at the same time, as a shape which throws a shadow. This hovering of God upon man seems to be similar to the created glory mentioned by the prophets above.¹⁵⁴ This theory of the protective image, which is also a divine name, removed only when death is announced or imminent, may be connected to aura theories, which are also attenuated or disappear before death.¹⁵⁵

The theory of the name as image is also linked to a concept described in *Sefer Yeširah* of sealing creation by the letters of divine names; the impact of this position on Abulafia's *Mafteah ha-Sefirot* was discussed earlier. This theory may have links to the creation of the *golem*, a central issue for the Ashkenazi masters who drew on earlier material. The formulae for the creation of the artificial anthropoid use letters of the divine name which are injected into the inert limbs in order to vivify them.¹⁵⁶ The *golem* is, according to a poem by Borges, the creature of another creature: man places the image as a name in the clay he gathered and shaped, which acts as its source of vitality, just as God did with Adam. To a certain extent, the *golem* is the alter ego of its creator since he puts part of his vitality into the inert matter that is supposed to become the artificial anthropoid, an issue that deserves further discussion.

Although in the Bible God himself is sometimes seen as hovering over man and protecting him, in the medieval Rhenan Hasidei Ashkenaz thinkers, God was replaced by His name, and thus the representative of God, in fact His extension, is perceived as defending and perhaps even defining man as his image-shield.¹⁵⁷ This theory is consonant with numerous discussions and practices related to divine names. Thus, as regards the nexus between practice, theology and experience, the Hasidei Ashkenaz understanding of the centrality of the divine name in these three main domains unifies them around a linguistic topic. A variety of continua between the divine and the human constitute a

¹⁵⁴ See *Hilkhot Nevu'ah*, quoted above.

¹⁵⁵ See Hollenbeck, *Mysticism*, pp. 288-290.

¹⁵⁶ See Idel, *Golem*, passim.

¹⁵⁷ See the interesting reverberation of this view in an influential early nineteenth century Hasidic book by R. Qalman Qalonimus Epstein of Crakow, *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, I, p. 9, where the divine name, the protection, the seal and the night of *Hosh'ana' Rabba'* are mentioned together.

plausible interpretation of certain important issues in this literature.

The identification of the image of God/man with the divine name found its way to Spain in the second part of the thirteenth century. We have already encountered the idea of Moses as the theophany of the divine Glory in the context of the divine name in Castile, in R. Shema'yah's book. However, the Ashkenazi view also penetrated Catalonia, and perhaps Barcelona, where R. Joseph ben Shalom, an Ashkenazi kabbalist who was well acquainted with the nexus between the *šelem* and the divine name used it in one of his kabbalistic writings. He claimed to be a descendant of R. Yehudah he-Hasid, a key figure in the history of Hasidei Ashkenaz thought, and a member of the most important family that preserved the secrets that were committed to writing in the mystical literature in Ashkenaz:

Know that anyone who believes in corporeality, or any type of corporeality concerning the *'Illat ha-'Illo*, denies the supreme ruler, blessed be His name and the Prophets [...] understand this and remain silent. The philosophers said that the verse 'Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad'¹⁵⁸ can be understood acronymically. The first letters of each word spell YHWH while the last letters of each word spell *šalmo*. This you must understand as well.¹⁵⁹

It is curious that a view that stems from the Hasidei Ashkenaz was attributed to one of their descendants, and a sharp critique of philosophy, to philosophers. There is only one case where such a mystical view, related to the use of the divine name and prophecy, was attributed to philosophers.¹⁶⁰ However, whoever these philosophers may be, it is obvious that it is the specific interpretation of the verses found in this quote that corresponds to the Ashkenazi tradition.

As late as the nineteenth-century this view dominated. According to R. Isaac Aizic Haver, a Lithuanian kabbalist, 'all the four letters of the Great and Awesome Name dwell upon each Israelite and this is the chain that is fixed in

¹⁵⁸ Psalm 96:11.

¹⁵⁹ Ms. Paris BN 841, fol. 66b. For a slightly different reading see M. Hallamish's edition of R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, p. 147, and see also Ibid., p. 149. For a French translation of the passage and a brief discussion, see G. Vajda, 'Un chapitre de l'histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la Philosophie', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 23 (1956), pp. 73-74.

¹⁶⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 105.

the soul of the Israelites'.¹⁶¹ The image of the cord is indeed reminiscent of the Talmudic passage mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph in a similar context; however, here it also has something to do with the Neoplatonic cord of the soul in that there is a juxtaposition of the *imaginaire* of the God/man image-cord with that of the name-cord.

The occurrence of the name-cord in the sources surveyed in this section should be understood against the backdrop of the interest of almost all of their authors in the process of prophecy by using divine names. By activating divine names, which may represent divine extensions hovering over man, these authors imagined they entered into a certain special type of communication with the divine realm.

6. DIVINE NAMES AND REVELATIONS IN *SEFER HA-MESHIV*

Late in the fifteenth century, perhaps in the seventies, a huge kabbalistic corpus was composed somewhere in Spain, presumably in Castile. This anonymous corpus, known as *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, or *The Book of the Answering Entity*, consists of a series of treatises, some of them composed by automatic writing and attributed to God, or to some high angels, who were imagined to have answered the questions of an unknown kabbalist.¹⁶² Most of the corpus is thus written as a revelation, but in many cases the question of how to receive a revelation is discussed in the book. It is not only a question of how to achieve a

¹⁶¹ *Siyah Yišaq*, p. 30. On the context of this quote see this volume, chapter 3, section 5.

¹⁶² On the writings which form the kabbalistic literature of this circle see Scholem, 'The Maggid'; Idem, 'On the Story of R. Joseph della Reina', *Hokhma Bina ve-Daat, Studies in Jewish History and Thought Presented to A. Altmann*, Alabama 1979, pp. 100-108 (Hebrew); Idem, 'Inquiries'; Idem, 'The Origin', pp. 117-124; Idem, 'Jewish Magic from the Renaissance Period to Early Hasidism', *Science, and Magic and Religion*, eds. J. Neusner and alia, pp. 82-117; Idem, 'Magic and Kabbalah in the Book of the Responding Entity', *The Solomon Goldman Lectures*, vol. 6, ed. M. Gruber, Chicago 1993, pp. 125-138; Idem, 'The Lost Books of Solomon', *Daat*, 32-33 (1994), pp. 235-246 (Hebrew); Idem, 'The Attitude to Christianity in Sefer ha-Meshiv', *Immanuel* 12 (1981), pp. 77-95. On the legend of R. Joseph della Reina, the main kabbalist from this circle, see also Meir Benayahu, 'The Story of R. Joseph della Reina', *'Areset* 5 (1972), pp. 170-188 (Hebrew); Joseph Dan, 'The Story of Joseph della Reina', *Sefunot* 6 (1962), pp. 311-326 (Hebrew); Michal Oron, 'The Expectation of Redemption, History and Literature in the Story of R. Joseph della Reina', *Between History and Literature*, Tel Aviv 1983, pp. 79-80 (Hebrew).

revelation in their time, but how in general religious literature was recorded in the glorious past. The quote below compares the revelations of the prophet Elijah to ancient *perfecti* with more contemporary revelations; in this quote God is speaking in the first person to the kabbalist and ‘analyzes’ the theophoric components of the name of Elijah: *El Yahw*, a fact which seems to be related to his immortality and ability to ascend and descend time and time again. Then he writes:

When he [Elijah] ascended on high, he acquired the power of spirituality¹⁶³ like an angel indeed, to ascend and [afterwards] to become corporeal and descend to this lower world where you exist, in order to perform miracles or to disclose My power and My *dynamis* in the world, and he causes the descent of My power in the world, forceful and compelling, from My great name, that is an integral part of him.¹⁶⁴ And because of this great secret he did not know the taste of death, so that he can cause the descent of My power and disclose My secret by the power of My precious names.¹⁶⁵ And he is called ‘The bird of heaven that will bring the voice’¹⁶⁶ and no one should have any doubt of it. He revealed himself to the ancient pious ones, factually in a spiritual body, which was enclosed and embodied in matter, and they spoke with him, by the virtue of their piety, and he revealed himself *in corpore et in spiritu*. This is the reason why those dreaming a dream cause the descent of My power, by his mediation, within you, without speech or a voice, and this is the secret of [the verse]¹⁶⁷ ‘for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations’. And My power is bound to him¹⁶⁸ and he is bound to your souls and discloses to you the secrets of My Torah, without speech. And a time will come, very soon, that he will reveal himself to you *in corpore et in spiritu* and this will be a sign of the coming of the Messiah. And by his descending to earth together with Him¹⁶⁹ then will he reveal *in corpore et in spiritu*, and many other will see him.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶³ *Koah ruhaniyyut*.

¹⁶⁴ i.e., of the angelic nature.

¹⁶⁵ The divine names play a central role in the theories of this book.

¹⁶⁶ Ecclesiastes 10:20.

¹⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 4:6.

¹⁶⁸ To Elijah or to his name. For more on this see below.

¹⁶⁹ Elijah together with the Messiah.

¹⁷⁰ Ms. Jerusalem, JNUL 8° 147, fol. 96b-97a; this passage was copied in the middle of the sixteenth century in Safed by R. ‘Ovadiah Hamon, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1597, fol. 58b-59a. The Hebrew original appears in Idel, *Inquiries*, pp. 212-213 and more

Elijah's revelation is commonplace in Jewish medieval literature, especially in the eschatological form, and *Sefer ha-Meshiv* is, no doubt, an apocalyptic book. From the early thirteenth century on, and even more in the sixteenth century, Elijah was thought to visit other kabbalists.¹⁷¹ The divine speaker contrasts the *illud tempus*, when the pious were able to see Elijah both in body and spirit, and the Messianic era with the present situation, when such a direct and corporeal revelation is apparently impossible. Instead of a strong waking vision, an oneiric revelation occurs, one in which the divine power is connected to Elijah and he is connected to the souls of men, 'while they dream'. In other words, in the dreams of some people at least, Elijah still reveals himself even in the present, bringing with him the divine power. What is fascinating about this quote is the fact that the unspoken revelation of the present is conceived of as inferior to the bodily one of the ancient and future days. The vision of the body and audible speech are seen as far superior to the more dreamlike revelations, which cannot be seen by someone other than the dreamer. The spiritual, oneiric and private revelations are less powerful forms of receiving messages from above. Redemption means the possibility to see in the state of wakefulness what we intimate in dreams. Implicitly, it also means hearing vocal revelations that are superior to the unspoken revelations of today. From the vantage point of the present study, what is especially interesting is a form of immanence by means of the presence of the divine names in hypodivine creatures. How do these names descend? According to another passage, this time attributed to the revelation of an angel, the angel communicates with the kabbalist by taking over a garment, a quintessential concept in this corpus:

The issue of the garment of the speaking angel [*ha-mal'akh ha-maggid*] who will come to someone and teach him Torah, I found it written in the book *Mar'ot le-Maggid*¹⁷² and the angel [who reveals himself] is called Azriel and he¹⁷³ has revealed to him great and hidden things which no mouth can tell. You

recently in Claude Sultan, *Levouch ha-Malkhout, Le vêtement royal*, Ph.D. Thesis, Université de Strasbourg 1990, pp. 181-182.

¹⁷¹ See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 236-237. For the revelation of Elijah in the writings of R. Joseph Qaro and Hayyim Vital see Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 76-77, 269-270.

¹⁷² The term *mar'eh*, the singular of *mar'ot*, means visions related to topics found in the biblical portions. Apparently one of the titles of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, was the Book of Visions, *Sefer ha-Marot le-Maggid*, at least in the codex that reached R. 'Ovadiah Hamon in mid-16th Safed.

¹⁷³ The angel, who revealed himself to the kabbalist who wrote *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.

should know that the secret of causing the descent of the supernal book is the secret of the descent of the supernal chariot,¹⁷⁴ and when you pronounce the secret of the Great Name, immediately the force of the ‘garment’ will descend downwards, which is the secret of Elijah, who is mentioned in the works of the sages. And by this R. Simeon bar Yoḥai and Yonathan ben ‘Uzziel learned their wisdom, and they deserved the secret of the ‘garment’ and to be dressed in it. And R. Ḥanina and R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah and R. ‘Aqiva and R. Ishmael ben Elisha and our holy Rabbi [i.e., R. Yehudah ha-Nasi] and Rashi and many others [learned] likewise.¹⁷⁵ And the secret of the ‘garment’ is the vision of the ‘garment’, which the angel of God is dressed in, with a corporeal eye, and it is he who is speaking to you because you did not merit to see him as they did; they received this privilege because they had a pure spirit and they merited the vision.¹⁷⁶ And the secret of the ‘garment’ was given to those who fear God and meditate upon His Name; they have seen it, those men who are the men of God were worthy of this state. And they fasted for forty days continuously, and during their fast they pronounced the Tetragrammaton forty-five times,¹⁷⁷ and on the fortieth day [the ‘garment’] descended on him and showed him whatever he wished [to know], and it stayed with him until the completion of the [study of the] subject he wanted [to know]; and they [i.e. Elijah and the ‘garment’] stayed with him day and night.¹⁷⁸ Thus was it done in the days of Rashi to his master, and the latter taught him [i.e. Rashi] this secret [of the ‘garment’], and by means of it [the secret.] he [Rashi] composed whatever he composed, by

¹⁷⁴ The descent of the *Merkavah* is identified with mystical, or magical reading of the Torah, an issue that has earlier sources in Jewish mysticism. However, according to other sources from this corpus, the ancient protagonists of the Heikhalot literature were able to ascend on high *in corpore* in order to see the chariot and the technique to do so was revealed to the late medieval kabbalist in order for him to do so. See Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1597, fol. 94a, d. note 171 above.

¹⁷⁵ With the exception of Rabbi, i.e., R. Yehudah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, all the names are those of ancient Tannaitic masters who were alleged heroes of ancient Jewish mystical literature.

¹⁷⁶ In Hebrew there is here a pun on the root *Zkhk*: *Zakhu*, they merited, and *zakhei ruah*, they had a pure spirit. The speaker is therefore clearly differentiating the ancient from the moderns, the latter are unworthy of seeing, as the ancients did, but can only hear the voice.

¹⁷⁷ This number appears in similar contexts: see Idel, *Inquiries*, pp. 213–215.

¹⁷⁸ Apparently, in *Sefer ha-Meshiv* all the revelations only took place at night, unlike the case of the great masters mentioned above.

means of his mentor and instructor.¹⁷⁹ Do not believe that he [Rashi] wrote this down from his own reason¹⁸⁰ for he did it by the secret of the 'garment' of the angel and the secret of mnemotechnics, which explain the questions one is asking or compose a book one wishes to compose, and [thus] were all the sciences copied,¹⁸¹ one by one. By this technique the ancient sages learned from him innumerable sciences. And this happened in the days of the Talmud and in the days of Rashi's master and in the days of Rashi, too, since his master began this [usage], and Rashi ended it, and in their times this lore¹⁸² was transmitted by word of mouth, one man to another, and this is the reason why all the sages of Israel relied upon Rashi, as at that time they knew the secret. Therefore, do not ever believe that he [Rashi] composed his commentaries on the Talmud and on the plain meaning of the Bible out of his reason, but by means of this force of the secret of the 'garment', and that [force] which wore it, which is an angel, since by means of it he could know and compose whatever he wished. This is the [power] which elevates the letters of the divine name¹⁸³ upwards,¹⁸⁴ and it brings downwards [both] the secret of the chariot and the thought of God. And those who were able to see it are like prophets, and in the times of the Talmud many used it. Afterward, those who pursued the lore diminished, and they resorted to the daughter of the voice, [*bat qol*] and the daughter of the voice is called the supernal voice [*ha-qol ha-'elyon.*]. It is heard like the voice of a man indeed, but they do not see a body, but a speaking voice.¹⁸⁵

This seminal passage combines a series of *topoi* of Jewish mystical literature. Fasting for forty days is already mentioned in the *Heikhalot* literature in connection with attempts to acquire mystical knowledge; in our context it is

¹⁷⁹ In Hebrew, *rabbo ve-'alufo*, alluding to angelic guidance. In the manuscript it is written Elijah, however, I doubt whether this is the correct version.

¹⁸⁰ Literally, 'his own head'.

¹⁸¹ In Hebrew the root 'tq is used. However, it points to transmission of the sciences from their celestial source to our world by means of copying divine books; see Idel, *Inquiries*, pp. 261 n. 81 and in R. Shlomo Molkho's revelations; see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 240.

¹⁸² How to receive revelations.

¹⁸³ H. This is a common abbreviation of the Tetragrammaton.

¹⁸⁴ Apparently, this is the way the magic of this kabbalistic system was thought to operate. The letters of the invocations ascended and reached the divinity. This is clear elsewhere in a text from this school. See the passage reproduced in Idel, *Inquiries*, p. 258, as well as Ide¹, *Kavanah and Colors*.

¹⁸⁵ Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1597, fol. 39a-39b; Idel, *Inquiries*, pp. 239-240; Sultan, *Levouch ha-Malkhout, Le vêtement royal*, pp. 114-116.

related to the processes of spiritualization, which enabled these sages to gain the vision. Interestingly enough, fasting was related explicitly to prophecy.¹⁸⁶ Prophecy is mentioned explicitly at the end of the quotation from *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, and in an important discussion found in *Sefer Kaf ha-Qetoret*, a major commentary on the Psalms from the circle of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, the relationship between the use of divine names and prophecy is stated clearly.¹⁸⁷ The garment concept, in Hebrew *Malbush*, the cloak every spiritual entity must wear when it descends to the nether worlds in order to reveal itself to men, is not new: in Neoplatonic and Gnostic theories of the descent of the spiritual into the material is it a way of acquiring corporeal elements on the way down. This theory has a long history in Kabbalah as well.¹⁸⁸ According to the doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, Elijah must use a garment to descend into this world. However, despite drawing on many classical kabbalistic motifs, the structure of the argument and the more general historiosophical claim seems to be novel. In classical ancient and early medieval rabbinic literature, the use of a mystical technique gives the Jewish masters prolific literary creativity and authority. Interestingly enough, though written by a Spanish Jew, the above passages reveal a special reverence for Ashkenazi figures, who like the ancient great mystical masters, are seen as paragons of a line of creativity that ceased with them.

The anonymous kabbalist uses the term ‘supernal mouth’ *ha-peh ha-elyon*, to name the last *sefira* which is assigned to the lower realm. He also refers to supernal teeth and tongue. He takes the biblical assertion that God spoke with Moses mouth to mouth quite literally, and he clearly describes this mouth- to-mouth communication as prophecy.¹⁸⁹ In one instance, he identifies the supernal tongue with the seven planets, which are governed by seven divine names.¹⁹⁰ As seen in the quotes above, Elijah himself is a garment of the divine power descending here below. God, hidden within Elijah, descends via a garment that enables both Himself and the angel to function in the material

¹⁸⁶ See, e.g., Rudolf Arbesmann, ‘Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity’, *Traditio* 7 (1949), pp. 1-71.

¹⁸⁷ Ms. Paris, BN 846, fol. 150b.

¹⁸⁸ See Elliot Wolfson, ‘The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides’, *Daat* 24 (1990), pp. XXXIX-XL; Dorit Cohen Aloro, *The Secret of the Garment in the Zohar*, Jerusalem 1987 (Hebrew); Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 206-233; Idel, *Golem*, pp. 89-90, 285-291.

¹⁸⁹ Ms. Jerusalem, Musaeiff 5, fols. 2b, 3b, 4b, 5b, 34b.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., fols. 4b-5a.

world. The last passage in fact deals with the descent of Elijah in a dream to key figures in the history of Judaism, most of them protagonists of Jewish mystical literature. For instance, the first two names are the famous «mystical» sages of ancient Judaism; the former is the principle protagonist of the *Zohar*, to whom the book has been – spuriously – attributed. The latter was the author of an Aramaic translation of the Bible, which became a standard work in the Middle Ages, and someone who has also been described as a mystical figure. The author of *Sefer ha-Meshiv* may have mentioned them together because both ‘interpreted’ the Torah; the book of the *Zohar* is taken to be a homiletic commentary on the Pentateuch and some of the scrolls. This interpretive activity is also obviously the case for the eleventh-century R. Shlomo Yiṣḥaqi, better known as Rashi, the prince of all Jewish interpreters, who interpreted both the Bible and the Talmud. All their achievements are portrayed here as due to their knowledge of the secret of the garment; i.e. how to induce the revelations of Elijah, who is the immediate source for all their books.

In several instances the technique used to prompt automatic writings was thought to be conducive to prophecy, as we saw in one of the passages above.¹⁹¹ The mechanism of the revelation is the presence, a garbed one, of God within Elijah, and then the presence of Elijah, again a garbed one, within the kabbalist who is the recipient of the revelation. Here the continuum between God and man is ensured by the median angelic entity Elijah. This continuum may also stem from wordplay on the consonants that constitute the name of Elijah – the double theophoric name *'Eliyahu: 'El YHW*. According to an early thirteenth-century anonymous Ashkenazi treatise, it is a permutation of the letters of *Yaho'el*, the name of an archangel according to some ancient Jewish texts, and also a permutation of *We-'Elohy* – which means ‘and divine’.¹⁹² This means that the three ontic levels: the divine, *We-'Elohy*, the angelic, *Yaho'el*, and *'Elyah W*, the human, are represented by three permutations of letters related to two divine names: *'El* and *YHWH*. This short treatise was known to R. Abraham Abulafia, a fact that may indicate that it was already available in thirteenth-

¹⁹¹ See also the passages reproduced in Scholem, *Maggid*, pp. 92, 94.

¹⁹² See Ms. Rome-Angelica 46, fol. 34a. See also *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, ed. Y. M. Epstein, Lemberg 1865, fols. 7b-8a. On the various versions of this treatise see Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, pp. 220-221; Idem, ‘The Seventy Names of Metatron’, *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 19-23; Yehuda Liebes, ‘The Angels of the *Shofar* and *Yeshua Sar ha-Panim*’, in *Early Jewish Mysticism*, ed. J. Dan, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 171-196 (Hebrew); Abrams, ‘The Boundaries’, pp. 301, note 33, 302-305.

century Spain.¹⁹³ As seen above in one of the quotes from *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, the fact that the Tetragrammaton is part of the name 'Eliyahu' is explicitly mentioned. Thus, if the divine name is found within the very letters of the name of the angelic Elijah, it is present, in turn, within the kabbalist. Thus, the divine name is also found and active within man, a theory reminiscent of some of the passages dealt with in previous paragraphs. The use of the divine name which, according to *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, should be repeated forty times, is part of a technique which draws the garment, namely the divine garbed within an angel which has a theophoric name, onto the mystic. One possibility that is beyond the scope of this discussion is whether this continuum of combined letters of the divine names was also accepted by R. Joseph Qaro and Ḥayyim Vital, whom in my opinion were influenced by *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, and were interested in experiences related to the revelation of Elijah.¹⁹⁴ The revelation of Elijah as the extension of the divine into the recipient mystic remained part of the history of Kabbalah. In a Lurianic treatise, whose author is not identifiable, entitled 'Elijah, the Angel of the Covenant', his revelation is repeatedly described as the 'secret of divinity', which is a garment, and it enters the minds of the Jewish masters, similar to the portrayal in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.¹⁹⁵

All these features should be seen in a wider perspective, which includes the ties between prayer, God as such, and Torah, whose study induces union with God, described sometimes as Torah and sometimes as commandment. Thus, God as name, as prayer, and as Torah characterize attempts to envision the divinity in terms of certain ritualistic concepts that also function as techniques, and create forms of continua between man and God. All these are cataphatic modes of religion, conceptualizing the existence of a deep-seated affinity between man, the technique, and God.

¹⁹³ See M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, New Haven 2000, pp. 85-87. This may be another example of Ashkenazi influence on Spanish Kabbalah, which corroborates the observation made above.

¹⁹⁴ See M. Idel, 'Enoch and Elijah: Some Remarks on Apotheosis, Theophany and Jewish Mysticism', (forthcoming); *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies, Book of Visions and Book of Secrets*, tr. Morris Fajerstein, New York 1999, p. 191.

¹⁹⁵ See 'Eliyahu Mal'akh ha-Berit', repr. Jerusalem 1986, fol. 28bd.

Chapter 3

Torah and Torah Study as Technique and Experience

When God left earth He forgot the Torah with the Jews, and since then they have been looking for Him. And shouting at Him in a loud voice: 'You forgot something, You forgot'. And other people think that this is the Jews' prayer.

– Yehudah Amihai, *Patuah/Sagur/Patuah*

1. THE TORAH IN RABBINIC THOUGHT

In addition to the ontological cords of Greek extraction, many forms of Jewish mysticism involved in linguistic continua; i.e. visions of meso-cosmic reality in which the lower and the higher realms are interconnected by linguistic cords, or what I have termed 'linguo-theologies' or 'linguo-theosophies'. This idea was sketched out in Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 examined in some detail the mystical implications of one of these cords, the divine names. By their very status, these entities embody presences of a supernal entity in this world through an organic affinity between the ontic *signifié* and the signifying entity. The affinity involved in the God-Name relationship precluded its wide circulation or use as a technique. The taboo concerning divine names was the prime reason why techniques based on these names are relatively rare in Jewish mysticism, although they are much more widespread in Jewish magic. However, unlike the anomian nature of these techniques, many other religious practices such as the study of the Torah, prayer and the commandments became techniques in Jewish mystical literatures for achieving direct contact or an intimate relationship with God or one of His extensions. Analyzing the various new interpretations of these topics as techniques goes beyond this work. I will focus here, as in the previous chapter, on a specific type of relationship between a technique and the nature of an ensuing experience. This relationship works by transposing certain linguistic components of the technique into some of the ingredients of the triggered experience.

This transposition was much easier semiotically with the divine name since the move from the significant to the *signifié* was facilitated by the double meaning of the Hebrew term *Shem*. The next two chapters explore instances in

which linguistic activities related to Torah study and prayer not only induce a paranormal experience; i.e. contact with another realm, but also present clear examples in which the supernal entity was designated by the term Torah or Prayer. The emergence of these two epithets for God is further evidence for the affinity between technique and experience that follows the pattern described for the divine name.

To a certain extent, the various continua described in Chapter 1 serve to attenuate the distance or bridge the gap between the divine and the human planes that have been described from rabbinic literature onward. God gave the Torah, the perfect law, and the individual simply needs to be involved intensely in the sacred text to receive all the answers to his queries. Direct communication becomes tenuous, and as a rabbinic commentary suggests, the sacred text takes the place of the divine:

Rabbi Jeremiah in the name of R. Hiyya bar Abba said: it is written ‘because your fathers deserted Me, [...] and did not keep My Torah’.¹ May they desert me but keep my Torah, because out of their studying Torah, the light within it² will cause them to repent.³

The canonical text and the rabbis, as experts on that text became practically the exclusive source for reliable religious knowledge. Prophecy was on the wane, according to a rabbinic commentary it is said that the divine spirit was becoming rare, and there was no high priest who could use the divinatory technique of *'urim* and *tummim*.⁴ Divine intervention in history and legislation become exceptional, and the religious energies of the rabbinic circles were channeled toward the instigation of learning and timely performance of the commandments as the main type of religious attitude to the divine. Rabbinic thought proposed a canonization of events and rituals by telescoping them into a mythical zone which I suggest calling the ‘meso-cosmos’, a zone of primordial Torah which never ceases to exist. This zone became the prototype for both the cosmos and human behavior, by divesting these events of their temporality. In some rabbinic texts Torah even includes instructions on ways to influence the status of the divine power. This radical ontologization of the Torah is of

¹ Jeremiah 16:11.

² On the light within Torah see below in this chapter in the sections on the Hasidei Ashkenaz and Polish Hasidism.

³ ‘Eikha’ Rabbati, *Petiheta* II; *Pesiqta’ de-Rabbi Kahana*, 16:5; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 33-34.

⁴ See above, chapter 2, section 1.

paramount importance for an understanding of certain basic developments in kabbalistic ontology. This ontology of the text, which also implies the unique status of Hebrew, serves as one of the most powerful intersections between rabbinic literature, which deals mostly with the ritual and legendary aspects of the Bible, and theosophical Kabbalah, which projected the primordial Torah into the bosom of the divine.

In Rabbinic Judaism, one of the most important religious obligations is the study of the Torah, *talmud torah*. This embraces not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the oral Torah, the Talmud. The intense involvement with books that should be perused and studied is indeed a preoccupation that is characteristic of Rabbinic Judaism and its medieval repercussions, and it is well reflected in both ancient and medieval mystical literature:

On what was the Torah written? On the white fire by the black fire, as it is said:
 ‘His locks are wavy, and black as a raven’.⁵ What is the meaning [of the phrase]
 ‘His locks are wavy’?⁶ On each and every title⁷ there are heaps and heaps⁸ of
Halakhot.⁹

The Midrashic exegesis is based upon a rather unusual reading of the biblical verse. Locks of hair, *taltalim* are divided into two words *tilei tilim*, literally ‘heaps of heaps’. *Qevušotav*, ‘wavy’, is interpreted as referring to an imaginary plural of *qoš*, a title or diacritical dot. In other words, in each tiny dot there are enormous quantities of implicit halakhic issues. There is also an obvious anthropomorphical overtone in the description of the Torah as being written on white fire. Here the effect is achieved by referring to the Beloved from the biblical verse in the Song of Songs. The first part of the verse: ‘The locks of the Beloved’, depicted here as black, refer to the black fire and implicitly to the letters of the Torah and the halakhic decisions emerging from the biblical text.

Thus, in rabbinic texts, the close-knit affinity between the outcome of Talmud Torah and its Author is highly organic. If the Written Torah is inscribed on the divine body, the Oral Torah, which is thought to derive from the Written one, derives as well from the divine body, like locks of hair. The connection between the student of Torah and the divine author is established through the

⁵ Song of Songs 5:11.

⁶ *Qevušotav taltalim shehorot*.

⁷ *Qoš*.

⁸ *Tilei tilim*.

⁹ See Idel, ‘The Concept of the Torah’, pp. 45–46. For a discussion of this view in Polish Hasidism see R. Pinhas of Koretz, *Midrash Pinhas*, fol. 23a.

Written and Oral Torah. The extension of the divine body as hair not only refers to topics in the oral Torah, but also to instructions for performing the commandments and this perspective may have added an experiential dimension to the accomplishment of ritual obligations of rabbinic figures. Here we have one of the first components of what I call 'linguo-theology'.

2. A LUMINOUS CORD: HASIDEI ASHKENAZ AND GERONESE KABBALISTS

Though this chapter deals primarily with linguistic cords, it is also relevant to examine the imagery of light that unites the higher and lower realms, a continuum which is widespread in many forms of religion. This imagery, which describes both the divine and its radiation below, has existed since ancient times.¹⁰ In the Middle Ages, it was one of the major forms of imagery associated with the process of emanation. There are numerous examples where a continuum of light was thought to link the mundane realm to the divinity. A person could, by performing certain rituals or techniques, become luminous and be integrated into this luminous continuum. In Jewish mysticism there are many references to light-imagery from late antiquity onwards.¹¹ A comprehensive survey of use of light in Jewish mysticism cannot be covered here, and I will only deal with the mystical implications of a chain of light as it relates to Torah study, based mainly on in the writings of a major thirteenth century author associated with the Rhenan pietists, R. Eleazar of Worms.¹² His writings often contain the verb *mazriah* 'causes the emergence of light', or 'shining', in contexts connected to a certain understanding of emanation.¹³ The use of the noun *zerihah* as emanation of the brilliance of the Glory on mirrors within the supernal worlds appears in an important Ashkenazi passage quoted

¹⁰ See A.L. Oppenheim, 'Akkadian puluhtu and melammu', *Journal of the American Society of Oriental Studies* 63 (1943), pp. 31-34; Erwin Goodenough, *By Light, Light*, New Haven 1935.

¹¹ Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, New York 1982, pp. 75-87 and R.J.Z. Werblowsky, 'Hanouca et Noël ou Judaisme et Christianisme', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 145 (1954), pp. 30-68.

¹² On this master see e.g., I. G. Marcus, *Piety and Society, The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany*, Leiden 1980, Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, passim, Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 188-269.

¹³ *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, pp. 83, 85, 92.

by R. Moshe Taku.¹⁴ The verbal form *mazriah* is also used in many cases as part of the revelation of the divine here below, the way the term 'or, 'light', stands for the divine glory and its extension here below.¹⁵ In some cases, the illumination of the divine glory onto the lower realms is related to a supernal luminous face which illuminates lower faces, the lowest one being the human face – an interpretation which apparently draws on older traditions.¹⁶

Another term related to the luminous continuum is *mareh*, apparition, a technical term crucial to the Pietistic-Ashkenazi view of the revelation that stresses the importance of the visual representation of divine decrees through the Glory and its continuous changes that indicate future events.¹⁷ These

¹⁴ Quoted in R. Abraham ben Azriel's *Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem*, ed., E.E. Urbach, Jerusalem 1939, vol. 1, p. 201 (Hebrew).

¹⁵ See, e.g., the passage reproduced and discussed by Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, p. 151.

¹⁶ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford 1985, pp. 329-334; On Paul's discussion of Christ's face as reflecting the glory or splendor of God to the faithful see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., 'Glory reflected on the Face of Christ 2 Cor 3:7-4:6 and a Palestinian Jewish Motif, *Theological Studies*. 42 (1981), pp. 630-644, who also quotes Qumran literature dealing with the illumination of the divine face. Compare also to J. Dupont, 'Le Chrétien, miroir de la gloire divine d'après 2 Cor 3, 18', *Revue Biblique* 56 (1949), pp. 392-411. See also Alan F. Segal, *Paul, the Convert*, New Haven and London 1992, pp. 152, 154 and the interesting text found in the Teachings of Silvanus, 110:14-19 on Christ: 'For he is from the power of God, and he is an emanation of the pure glory of the Almighty. He is the spotless mirror of the working of God, and he is the image of his goodness. For he is also the Light of the Eternal Light'. Cf. W.R. Schoedel, 'Jewish Wisdom and the Formation of the Christian Ascetic', *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. R.I. Wilken, Notre Dame 1975, pp. 191-192. See also the Targum on the Song of Songs analyzed Raphael Loewe, 'The Divine Garment and *Shi'ur Qomah*', *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965), pp. 153-160, especially p. 156, about the radiance of the glory, *kavod* of the face of God and compare it to the book of *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:26 where the preexistent Sophia is described as follows: 'For she is an effulgence from everlasting light/ and an unspotted mirror of God's working/ and an image [eikon] of his goodness'. tr. Martin Hengel, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah, Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, Minneapolis 1992, p. 436, compares it to Jesus as 'reflection of His glory' and 'gives light to creatures'.

¹⁷ See the important discussions in the treatise attributed to R. Yehudah he-Hasid, called *Sefer ha-Kavod*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1566, fol. 38a. On this term see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, e.g. pp. 200, 206, 207 and his *Along the Path*, p. 155 note 219. For more on *mar'ot* and *mahazot* see the important discussions in Asi Farber, 'The Concept of the Merkabah in the Thirteenth-Century Jewish Esoterism – *Sod Ha-'Egoz* and its Development', Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 402-414, 417-418,

concepts are part of the descending continua and refer to modes of divine action or decrees which reach the lower worlds.

Torah study thus transforms the student by making him similar to his subject matter, both of which are conceived of in luminous terms. This theory may reflect a type of transformation found in other religious traditions where the link to the divine induces a state of photism.¹⁸ This notion is presented in an important treatise dealing with hermeneutics entitled *Sefer ha-Hokhma*, by R. Eleazar of Worms. The Torah, which the Bible defines as identical with or comparable to light, illuminates its devoted students and they become luminescent because of the light of the Torah:

Whoever darkens himself, day and night, in the light of the Torah, [He] will enlighten his face, and he will have a splendor and ornament of the Glory, ‘the crown of the Beloved¹⁹ [...] as it is said²⁰ ‘The wisdom of man will enlighten his face.’²¹

Elsewhere in his writings, R. Eleazar discusses the resemblance between the faces of Israel and those of the angels when they received the Torah, in a context in which both the Glory of God and the radiance of Moses’ face is explicitly mentioned.²² The phrase ‘light of the Torah’ *‘Or Torah* – unlike the biblical phrase *Torah ‘Or* which means that the ‘light is light’ – is present in ancient

653 (Hebrew), which includes the relevant bibliography on this topic, and discusses the differences between *dimyonot*, *mar’ot* and *ṣelem*. On a relatively early use of facial imagery in Spain see the text printed by Ezra Fleisher, ‘Addenda to the Paytanic Legacy of R. Isaac Ibn Mar-Shaul’, *Tarbiz* 63 (1994), p. 423 (Hebrew), where God is described as putting dust on the faces of ten *mar’ot*, a term which has no sense in Hebrew, but which can be amended by reading *mar’ot*, namely mirrors. Nine mirrors or specula are a leitmotif in Midrashic sources. Thus, the reflection of the divine in the faces of the nine mirrors was dimmed because of the mourning related to the destruction of the temple.

¹⁸ See the previous chapter, section 3, and Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 203-204, 206-213; Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 60-66

¹⁹ ‘Ateret Sevi. This expression is like the end of the verse in Isaiah 28:5, which occurs in a similar context in a quote below.

²⁰ Ecclesiastes 8:1.

²¹ Printed in R. Eleazar’s *Perush ha-Torah*, I, pp. 31-32. See also Green, *Keter*, pp. 106-120.

²² *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, p. 82.

Jewish texts, including the Heikhalot literature, rabbinic literature²³ and in early Kabbalah.²⁴ The light of the Torah is understood to envelope the scholar. This is not only a matter of contamination of the student by an imagined attribute of the object of his study, but in fact is part of a broader picture. The passage continues by saying that the divine Glory is luminous and this luminosity is reflected on the student's face. A similar interpretation appears elsewhere in this same book:

The [study of] the Talmud produces an ornament for man, and the 'countenance of his face' [*qelaster panav*] is bright like the splendor of the radiance of the great light, as it is said by the sages 'Whoever studies the Torah, a thread of mercy is drawn to him'.²⁵

Thus there is a continuity between the divine, the Torah and the Talmud, and by extension the student's face. They all can be luminous, but the luminosity of the student's face is explicitly dependent upon arduous study of the Torah. Through study the student's face connects to the cord of light that descends onto the Torah, and the student in a sense 'consumes' this light. Moreover, the Torah is expressly viewed by R. Eleazar as tantamount to the face of the *Shekhinah*.²⁶ Therefore, the study of the Torah – and of the Talmud according to another view – enables the student to become more similar to the supernal, luminous face of the Glory. The emphasis on assiduous study of the Torah warrants the assumption in my opinion that study can be seen as a technique for assimilation of the luminous face of the Torah, and by extension the even more luminous face of the Glory.

An important text from another book by R. Eleazar takes us a step further

²³ See the phrase '*Orah shel Torah*' in R. Yehudah Barzilai of Barcelona's *Commentary on Sefer Yesirah*, ed. S.Z.H. Halberstam, Berlin 1885, p. 25, discussed in the context of other views of R. Eleazar by Wolfson, 'The Mystical Significance', p. 65.

²⁴ See R. Azriel of Gerona's *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, p. 77; see also Cordovero's *Shi'ur Q'mah*, fol. 63c and see also the passage from his *Sefer 'Elimah Rabbati*, printed in Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Qabbalah*, p. 177. The phrase '*Orah shel Torah*' in a very similar context, but without mentioning the face, occurs in R. Yehudah Barzilai of Barcelona's *Commentary on Sefer Yesirah*, p. 25, discussed in the context of other views of R. Eleazar by Wolfson, 'The Mystical Significance', p. 65.

²⁵ R. Eleazar's *Perush ha-Torah*, I, pp. 45–46. See also the text from Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1567, fol. 71b, in the name of *Sefer ha-Kavod*, reproduced in Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, p. 60.

²⁶ See his *Commentary on the Prayerbook*, Ms. Paris BN 772, fol. 84a, quoted by Wolfson, 'The Mystical Significance', p. 61 note 70.

toward a better understanding of the affinity between the human and the divine face. Just like Moses receiving the Torah, who met God whose face is described as luminous, the medieval student of the Torah encountered the light of the face of the Glory or of God. R. Eleazar writes as follows:

But the Creator, His Unity will not vary, neither will it change or have changed. But in accordance with the topic [that God would like to teach] he displays His Glory. He shows everything by means of the radiance of His great fire. If He is angry, He presents an angry face [*ke-panim zo'afot*]. Everything is in the cloud of His Glory, opposite to Him.²⁷

Illumination of the face is not the only relationship to the supernal light. According to another text by this same master, when God wants to elevate the soul to be preserved under the throne of Glory: 'He shows her the splendor of His Glory' which then attracts the soul like a magnet,²⁸ while in *Sodei Razayya'* the recipient of the secrets of the *Merkavah* is enthroned like Adam.²⁹ Again, according to another passage by the same author found in his *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, the primordial light, which was hidden from man according to Midrashic traditions, is nevertheless 'renewed in proportion to the deeds of men'.³⁰

R. Eleazar apparently inherited a theory found in an earlier classic of the Pietist-Ashkenazi literature, *Sefer Hasidism*. There the descent of the divine decree is described in these terms:

The angels are glad when the soul is harmony³¹ with them: if we were on earth, we would be like this soul which was with us and went down to dwell on earth. And because the soul is on high he made a body in the likeness of *Elohim* and created it in the image of *Elohim*. As long as someone does not transgress, and does not enjoy whatever his eyes see, on high the angels of mercy and angels of peace are similar to the righteous; and if someone does not embellish his face so

²⁷ *Sodei Razayya'*, *Hilkhot ha-Kavod*, p. 37, Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, p. 84. The mention of the cloud has something to do with the role of water as reflecting the higher entities according to other Ashkenazi and earlier texts. The phrase *panim zo'afot* is reminiscent of Midrashic discussions that deal with the reciprocal relationship between God and man using the same expression. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 175.

²⁸ *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, p. 23.

²⁹ Ed. Weiss, p. 135. See also p. 138. For additional examples of ascent by means of a ray that brings the soul to the upper world see Idel, 'In the Light of Life', pp. 209-211.

³⁰ Cf. his *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 1, p. 31.

³¹ In Hebrew *shavah* means, more literally, identical.

that people will desire him, and is careful not to ruminate [sexually] in the thought of his heart, He causes the brilliance to fall on the face of that [entity] who was made on high in their likeness. And so long as these faces are luminous, no demonic power is able to harm him. And it is said³² 'He was similar to an animal, became like [them]'. And our sages said³³ that 'No beast or demonic power can have power over man, unless he becomes like an animal', namely an animal like it is. And this is [the meaning of] what was said³⁴ 'The image³⁵ has been removed from them'. However, when someone sins and enjoys his transgressions, then the faces of the pernicious angels are delighted³⁶ because of these [sins] and the faces of anger are in front of them and smoke [dwells] on them. And the faces that are in the likeness of the righteous are like the faces [found] in front of the faces standing before the Glory,³⁷ as gladness is there.³⁸

This seminal text combines a variety of topics mentioned above, including facial and luminous continua. However, in this passage the verb *mazriah* refers to the relationship between two entities on high, which is itself dependent on the deeds performed in the mundane world. This relationship is similar to phenomena known in Kabbalah scholarship as theurgy, and other writings of R. Eleazar come even closer to kabbalistic theurgy.³⁹ Unlike the quote from *Sefer Hasidim* which deals with performing the commandments, in two of his books R. Eleazar combines performance with Torah study, both of which embellish the soul with the radiance of the Glory. He writes that:

³² Psalm 49:13.

³³ *BT, Sabbath*, fol. 151b.

³⁴ Numbers 14:9.

³⁵ *Selem*. In fact, the original significance of *şilam* is 'their shadow'

³⁶ 'ulṣu.

³⁷ *ke-panim she-li-fnei ha-kavod*. This phrase can stand for, in an elliptic manner, the supernal faces which exist in the presence of the Glory. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 205–206.

³⁸ *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Reuven Margoliot, Jerusalem 1964, pp. 566–567, §1136.

³⁹ See e.g. Id-el, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 160–161, 192–196 and the additional cases discussed by Wolfson, *Along the Path*, pp. 170–171 note 307. On the theurgical implications of the relationships between corresponding structures in other Ashkenazi texts see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 210 note 83. Compare, however, J. Dan's different opinion as expressed in his *Esoteric Theology*, p. 129, and in his 'A Re-evaluation of the "Ashkenazi Kabbalah"', *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, ed., J. Dan, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 138–139 (Hebrew).

When the soul leaves [the body] it clothes itself in the radiance of the [divine] glory if it was involved with the commandments, either by studying them or by keeping them since ‘the commandment is a candle but Torah is light’⁴⁰ [...] lights ['orot] in *gematria* equals 613⁴¹ [...] and it is written⁴² ‘The Lord of the Host will be the diadem of Beauty’ because the radiance of the Glory shines over the head of the Righteous.⁴³

The term *zohar ha-kavod* translated above as ‘radiance of the Glory’ is critical to the theosophy of Ashkenazi Hasidism. According to one tradition, it was already in use at least two generations before R. Eleazar; he states that he received an oral tradition from R. Yehudah he-Hasid, who received it from his father R. Samuel, where this term occurs.⁴⁴ Indeed *zohar ha-kavod* – and sometimes ‘*or ha-kavod* or *hod ha-kavod*’ – are typical phrases in R. Eleazar’s writings.⁴⁵

However, what is crucial to an understanding of the history of Kabbalah and metamorphoses of the ideas about continua is the fact that this specific phrase, namely *zohar ha-kavod*, which found exclusively in the circle of the Ashkenazi authors of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, also occurs in the writings of their Spanish kabbalist contemporaries. In a text which may possibly be attributed to R. Azriel of Gerona, the phrase *zohar ha-kavod* is mentioned: ‘The *Shekhinah* receives the radiance of the inner Glory [*zohar ha-kavod ha-penimi*] by means of the holy *sefirot* which are above her’.⁴⁶ Elsewhere this Geronese master writes, in a manner reminiscent of some of the Ashkenazi passages above, that ‘Anyone fulfilling a commandment must feel the awe of the

⁴⁰ Proverb 6:23.

⁴¹ In Rabbinic Judaism there are 613 commandments. See also *ibidem*, p. 553.

⁴² Isaiah 28:5.

⁴³ Commentary on the Prayerbook, p. 402; A very similar passage is also found in his *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, p. 12. See also *ibidem*, p. 85 where it is written that the righteous men receive the light of the glory, because they will be like the four beasts, the carriers of the divine chariot. See also *ibidem*, p. 77.

⁴⁴ See Ms. Parma de Rossi 1390, fol. 78b, R. Abraham ben Azriel, *Sefer ‘Arugat ha-Bosem*, vol. 1, p. 200.

⁴⁵ *Sodei Razaya*, pp. 91, 155; *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, pp. 12, 85. See also Wolfson, *Through the Speculum*, pp. 202-203.

⁴⁶ See Ms. New York, JTS 1887, fol. 38a, Ms. New York, JTS 2194, fol. 38. More on the passage from which this quote was translated see Idel, ‘*Simshum*’, pp. 102-104.

commandment⁴⁷ upon him, as though he were crowned and embellished by the [divine] glory'.⁴⁸ The somewhat older compatriot of R. Azriel, R. Ezra of Gerona also used the imagery of a continuum of light to make sense of the performance of the ritual:

One who acts below maintains and sustains [*meqayyem u-ma'amid*] its power [*koah*] [on high] as it is said:⁴⁹ 'The commandment is a candle but the Torah is light' and he walks in the ways of light, and he does not depart from it, and he is immersed in it. When the soul is detached from the body, that light draws the soul, being like a magnet to that soul, as it is written:⁵⁰ [...] because the divine manifestation draws her, as it is written:⁵¹ 'his horn shall be exalted with honor;' i.e. the splendor of the soul ascends and stands in a supernal and intimate place, within the glory of the Blessed Holy One.⁵²

Though R. Ezra uses the phrase 'the radiance of the inner Glory' and not only 'radiance of Glory' the affinity is close enough to justify a meaningful relationship between the two Jewish contemporary mystical literatures. It is problematic to establish the historical sources for these luminous continua, especially the Ashkenazi ones. Some may have been connected to the theory of the divine Glory as light found in early Jewish philosophical sources, whereas others may show the impact of Neoplatonic sources.⁵³ This type of imagery is also found in one of the epistles of *Ikhwan al-Safa*, the so-called Brethren of Purity, an Isma'ilya collection of treatises, where the spiritual development of the soul is described as follows:

⁴⁷ The phrase '*'Eimat ha-Miṣwah*', already appears in the *Palestinian Talmud, Damai*, ch. IV.

⁴⁸ See *Commentary on the Talmudic 'Aggadot*, p. 39. The connection between performing the commandments and an experience of union with God is found in many sources. see e.g. R. Yeshayah Horowitz, *Sha'ar ha-Shamayyim*, fol. 103a and R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or 'Einayyim*, Jerusalem 1975, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁹ Proverbs 6:23.

⁵⁰ Psalms 112:9.

⁵¹ *ibidem*.

⁵² See *Commentary on Taryag Miṣwot*, reproduced at the end of the *Commentary on the Songs of Songs*, attributed to Nahmanides, in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. H. D. Chavel, Jerusalem 1964, vol. 2, p. 524. More on this passage see below, 'Concluding Remarks', section 3.

⁵³ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 86, 116-117. For an up-to-date survey of light in Neoplatonism see Noel Aujoulat, *Le Néoplatonisme Alexandrine, Hierocles d'Alexandrie*, Leiden 1986, pp. 40-42.

When the soul awakes from the sleep of negligence and the slumber of foolishness [...] and is cleansed from material habits [...] it escapes and experiences its resurrection, it becomes luminescent, and its substance will be brilliant and its gaze will be sharpened. It will then behold the spiritual forms, contemplate the eternal substances of light, and behold the hidden things and secret mysteries [...] Having contemplated these hidden things, it will cling to them, even as the lover clings to the beloved. It will become one with them, as light unites with lights, and will remain eternally with them in bliss.⁵⁴

In the mid-sixteenth century, this theme of the union between two lights appears once again in a book by R. Moses Cordovero, with however the additional element that the Torah is instrumental in bringing about this union:

This is our *bonum* that we shall attain this unification⁵⁵ and to illuminate in the light of the Torah to be integrated light into light up to the level of *Binah* and *Hokhmah*, since we may not cleave but until that place because the *devequt* on the higher level is possible only in an intermittent manner⁵⁶ [...] all the other boni being not [genuine] boni at all, but a certain apprehension and that *devequt* is the main *bonum* all the other boni being but a preparation for this *bonum*.⁵⁷

These two quotes describe the integration of light into a higher light. However, the Safedian kabbalist, unlike the Muslim Neoplatonist, refers to the light of the Torah in a manner reminiscent of the earlier linguo-theosophical debates in Judaism. Cordovero adopted a Neoplatonic mode of thought, but also adapted it by inserting ritualistic and linguistic elements.

3. THEOSOPHICAL MESO-COSMISM

As seen above, early theosophical kabbalists described the connection between the human and divine realms through imagery of light. However, in the theosophical kabbalists' theories the major features of the divine realm are constituted by the ten *sefirot*, or their variants. These divine powers have often been envisioned as constituting a chain,⁵⁸ whose links are designated by various concepts related to the Torah. In some early kabbalistic systems the second

⁵⁴ See Alexander Altman - Samuel Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, Oxford 1958, p. 186.

⁵⁵ The unification of the *sefirot* *Hokhmah* and *Binah*.

⁵⁶ *Be-raso va-shov*.

⁵⁷ *Shi'ur Qomah*, fol. 1od.

⁵⁸ Cf. above ch. 1 note 17.

sefirah, Hokhmah, stands for the primordial Torah, the sixth *sefirah, Tiferet*, stands for the Written Torah, and the last *sefirah, Malkhut*, is associated with the Oral Torah. From this point of view, quite early in the history of theosophical Kabbalah, the Torah (in its various definitions) was projected onto the divine realm and became part of the mapping of an ontic zone of Torah. Thus, the ability to move from the mundane practice of studying Torah to contact with the supernal forms of the Torah was facilitated by this recurrent kabbalistic symbolism. R. Moses ben Shem Tov de León, an influential late thirteenth century kabbalist active in several cities in Castile, writes that when all the lower degrees, namely the extra-divine planes of reality, cleave to the lowest divine attribute, the last *sefirah*, 'the chain will be in its [ideal] state'.⁵⁹ Elsewhere in his writings we read that:

God has bequeathed this holy Torah to Israel from above to bequeath to them the secret of His name, Blessed be He, and to [enable Israel to] cleave to Him [or to His name] and that all the worlds will be equal⁶⁰ according to one secret and one outcome and that all are linked [to each other] and descend [*u-mishtalshelim*]⁶¹ according to the secret of His Name, Blessed be He, in order to show that as this name [or He] is infinite and limitless, so is this Torah infinite and limitless [...] since the Torah is 'longer than the earth and broader than the sea'⁶² we must be spiritually aware and know that the essence of this existence is infinite and limitless. And behold that the essence of His Existence descends⁶³ from the source of the supernal rank, from where all the essences expand. We should know that the source of the [supernal] rank is the secret of the Torah, since you already know that the supernal rank is the first and supernal point and is the secret of the Torah.⁶⁴

De León employed the image of infinity found in the Bible in relation to the second *sefirah, Hokhmah* or wisdom. This approach illustrates the hyper-semantic vision of the Bible which was so characteristic of kabbalistic types of thought. Here, not only does the infinity of the Torah reflect God's infinite

⁵⁹ Ms. Jerusalem JNUL 8° 6246, fol. 4a, which is an unidentified commentary on prayers by de León.

⁶⁰ *Shaveh*. Perhaps a view of the sexual union between the male and feminine aspects of divinity, as in some sources in Nahmanides' school.

⁶¹ This verb occurs several times in de León's book, including on this page and elsewhere in the volume. See also above, ch. 1, note 27.

⁶² Job 11:9.

⁶³ *Mishtalshel*.

⁶⁴ *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, p. 326.

wisdom, but intimation of part of this infinity provides a way to cleave to Him and an assimilation to the divine. The Torah is seen in a highly instrumental way, as a path towards a unitive experience that avoids any specific reasoning that addresses its particular textuality. Unlike infinities related to semantic aspects of biblical text, de León assumes that it is the presence of God as author that ensures the infinity of the text. The supernal Torah is conceived of as the source of all the emanations, and the assumption is that the lower Torah reflects this semantic plenitude, and facilitates adherence to the divine realm defined in terms of Torah. Therefore, at the two extremities of the emanational chain we find two forms of the Torah, and the study of the lower enables the mystic to reach the higher.

Quintessential to an understanding of this text, like others in this chapter, is the special status assigned to the Torah because of the presence of the divine name in the text. By means of this name, God is perceived in a more substantial manner, in addition to the 'deep' messages encoded into the text in its narrative and ritualistic passages. The 'cord-like' *imaginaire* is extremely clear: the first anchor is the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, which is identical to the supernal Torah.⁶⁵ This text assigns greater importance to the divine name over other parts of the Torah. This hierarchy may create a gap between some privileged features of biblical texts and others, in a manner reminiscent of the views of R. Joseph Gikatilla and R. Abraham Abulafia, whose forms of Kabbalah gravitated much more around the divine names. In their theories, heterogeneous text, as seen in the previous chapter and as we shall see further in the next section, provides instants – the occurrence of the divine names – when it is easier to connect to the divine than in other literary parts of the Bible.

A more homogenous understanding of the Bible is found in a contemporary of R. Moses de León, an author whose identity is not firmly established, but who presents a more detailed explanation of the manner in which someone may have a sense of direct contact with divinity through biblical text, in *The Book of [Divine] Unity*:

⁶⁵ See, e.g., *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 327, 329–330. For the 'Supernal Well' as the beginning of the chain see *Ibid.*, p. 182. While de León sees in the second sefirah the beginning of the chain, R. Joseph of Hamadan regards the first *sefirah* as the beginning. See his *Commentary on Ten Sefirot*, Ms. Paris BN 853, fols. 80a, 81a, 84a. See also M. Idel, 'R. Joseph of Hamadan's Commentary on Ten Sefirot and Fragments of His Writings', '*Alei Sefer* 6–7 (1979), p. 74 note 6 (Hebrew).

God gave us the entire perfect Torah from the [word] *bereshit* to the [words] *le-einei kol Yisrael*.⁶⁶ Behold, how all the letters of the Torah, by their shapes, combined and separated, swaddled letters, curved ones and crooked ones, superfluous and elliptic ones, minute and large ones, and inverted, the calligraphy of the letters, the open and closed pericopes and the ordered ones, all of them are the shape of God, Blessed be He. It is similar to, though incomparable with, something someone paints using [several] kinds of colors, likewise the Torah, beginning with the first pericope until the last one is the shape of God, the Great and Formidable, Blessed be He, since if one letter is missing from the Scroll of Torah, or one is superfluous, or a [closed] pericope was [written] in an open fashion or an [open] pericope was [written] in a closed fashion, that Scroll of Torah is flawed, since it has not in itself the shape of God, blessed be He the Great and Formidable, because of the change caused by the shape. And you should understand it! And because it is incumbent on each and every one of Israel to say that the world was created for him.⁶⁷ God obliged each and every one of them to write a scroll of the Torah for himself, and the concealed secret is [that he] made God, blessed be He.⁶⁸

God is not only reflected in the scroll of the Torah because of its special form of spelling and writing of the letters. Rather, this presence can be copied. Religiously speaking, Jews are obliged to reproduce the scroll because of this type of reflection of the divine within the text. This iconic vision assumes not only an anthropomorphical understanding of the Torah, because it reflects the divine structure, but also the literal nature of the divine, given the fact that the forms of letters constitute the divine shape. This formal correspondence between the lower and higher, and the anthropomorphic nature of the text, changes the basic approach toward the Bible from hyper-semantic to hypo-semantic. It is not the specific meaning or meanings of the canonical text but its

⁶⁶ The idea of perfection is probably related to the fact that the first and last letter were thought to be close to each other. This idea is found, to a certain extent, in Nahmanides' introduction to his *Commentary on the Torah*, which also influenced the description of the visual aspect of the Torah in the following lines.

⁶⁷ See *Tanna' de-Bei Eliyahu*, ch. 25.

⁶⁸ *Sefer ha-Yihud*, Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana 62, fol. 113b, reproduced and discussed in Idel, 'Concept of the Torah', pp. 62-64; See also Idel, *R. Menahem Recanati, the Kabbalist*, chapter 16. See also Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 43-44; Mopsik, *Les Grands textes*, pp. 278-287, 560-565; Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of the Torah, Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1989, p. 43; Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah, Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*, Albany 1996, p. 361.

iconicity that counts, though it should be stressed that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. This oscillation between the anthropomorphical and the literal structures is highly representative of another kabbalist associated with theories found in *Sefer ha-Yihud*. In his *Commentary on the Rationales of the Commandments*, the mysterious kabbalist known under the name of R. Joseph of Hamadan draws detailed parallels between Torah and anthropomorphic visions of the *sefirot* and God in more general terms:

Why is it called Torah? It has an open and a closed pericope, referring to the image of a building and the form of man, who is like the supernal, holy, and pure form. And just as there are joints in man connected to each other, in the Torah there are closed pericopes like in the case of the structure of the pericope *va-yehi be-shalah Pharaoh*⁶⁹ and the secret of the song ‘az yashir moshe⁷⁰ are the secret of the joints of the Holy One, blessed be His hands. And the song of *ha-'azinu*⁷¹ is the secret of the ear of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the secret of ‘az yashir yisrael⁷² is the secret of the divine circumcision [Berit.] [...] and the positive commandments correspond to the secret of the male and the negative commandments correspond to the secret of the female and to the secret of the *Shekhinah* and to the secret of *Malkhut*. This is the reason why the Torah is called so, because it refers to the likeness of the Holy One, blessed be He.⁷³

R. Joseph of Hamadan presents an interesting interpretation of the word Torah. The noun ‘Torah’ generally suggests instruction, but here the medieval kabbalist interprets it as meaning ‘reference’, by stressing the verbal form *morah*. Unlike ancient usage which implies instruction from the supernal realm to man here below, the kabbalist turns it in the opposite direction. The lower entity, the

⁶⁹ Exodus 13:17-17:16.

⁷⁰ Exodus 15:1 ff. which is included in the abovementioned portion.

⁷¹ Deuteronomy 32:1-43.

⁷² Number 21:17.

⁷³ Ms. Jerusalem, JNUL 8° 3925, fol. 110b. For the affinities between this text and Geroneese Kabbalists see the introduction by M. Meier, ed., ‘A Critical Edition of the *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Mitzwoth* Attributed to Isaac ibn Farhi’, Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University 1974, pp. 32-33, and Idel, ‘The Concept of the Torah’, pp. 49-56, idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 449-459, for another quote from the *Commentary on the Rationales of the Commandments*. The identity between the Torah and the essence of God in quite explicit terms occurs in the late fifteenth century *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, cf. the passage reproduced by Scholem, ‘The ‘Maggid’’, p. 100. On this book see also above, chapter 2 section 5.

Torah, reflects a higher one, and thus it paves the way to an understanding of the divine through comprehension of the structure of the text. This understanding is based upon an isomorphism between portions of the Torah and the limbs of the divine anthropos. However, unlike many types of theosophical Kabbalah, this symbolic function does not operate on the narrative level by introducing a divine myth paralleled by and reflected in mundane events. According to R. Joseph of Hamadan, what counts is the shape of the portion of the canonical text and not its content. Similar to *Sefer ha-Yihud*, which fits closely with Hamadan's ideas, the assumption is that God and the Bible are identical or at least isomorphic. However, what is fascinating in the last quote is not the avowal of this isomorphism, but the attempt to correlate specific sections of the biblical text with specific limbs of the supernal anthropos. The significance of this relationship is captured below:

Happy is the man who knows how to relate a limb⁷⁴ to another and a form to another [form], which are found in the Holy and Pure Chain,⁷⁵ blessed be His Name, because the Torah is His form, blessed be He. He commanded us to study Torah in order to know the likeness of the Supernal Form; as some kabbalists said⁷⁶ 'Cursed is whoever will not keep this Torah up'. Can the Torah fall? This [verse should be taken as] a warning for the cantor to show the written form of the Torah scroll to the community for them to see the likeness of the Supernal Form. Moreover, the study of the Torah brings someone close to seeing supernal secrets and the Glory of the Holy One, blessed be He, indeed.⁷⁷

This passage discusses knowledge of the structural affinity between human limbs and forms and the divine ones. The cognitive movement is expressly upward. The form of the letters in the Torah is assumed to play the same role as in the human body; the latter is an icon enabling the contemplation of the supernal form. This explains the custom of showing the open scroll of the Torah

⁷⁴ i.e. a human limb to a divine limb.

⁷⁵ *Shalshelet ha-qedoshah va-ha-tehorah*. This phrase occurs frequently in R. Joseph's writings and see below the next quote from his book. See above, note 65 and also chapter 1 notes 17, 25 and Elqayam, '*Ereš ha-Ševi*', pp. 153 note 95, 155-156 notes 100-103.

⁷⁶ Deut. 27:26. I translated the verse in the literal way in which R. Joseph understood it.

⁷⁷ Ms. Jerusalem JNUL 8º 3925, fol. 110b. See also Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', p. 65. For an additional analysis of aspects of this passage see *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 294-296.

to the members of the community after the reading of the weekly portion. However, the formal correspondences between the lower and higher limbs should be understood in a broader sense. The Hebrew expression '*ever ke-neged 'ever*', limb to limb, is reminiscent of another recurrent phrase in R. Joseph of Hamadan's nomenclature: '*ever mahaziq 'ever*' which means that the lower limb not only corresponds to but also supports the supernal one. He is arguing that performance of the commandments by a certain limb strengthens its parallel limb found on high, which is a *sefira*.⁷⁸ Thus, the contemplation of the higher from the vantage point of the lower is not the only, and perhaps not even the most important type of relationship between certain shapes here below, the human body and the Torah, and the supernal sefirotic structure on high. The lower not only knows the higher, but also contributes to its making – similar to the quote from *Sefer ha-Yikud* – or supports it as in R. Joseph of Hamadan's books. This theurgical influence is only possible because of the affinities between three isomorphic structures: the Torah, the human body, and the ten *sefirot* which form the divine realm. Elsewhere in his *Commentary on the Rationales of the Commandments*, R. Joseph writes:

Woe to whoever believes that there is nothing more than the plain meaning of the Torah, because the Torah is the name of the Holy One blessed be He, in its entirety [...] and it consists of inner [i.e. spiritual] things [...] such that no creature can comprehend the greatness of its rank, but God, blessed be He, the supreme and the wonderful One who created it. And the Holy One, blessed be he, His Torah is within Him and in Him there is the Torah, and this is the reason why kabbalists said that 'He is in His name and the Name is in Him',⁷⁹ He is His Torah and the Torah is made of the holy and pure chain, in [the image of the] supernal form, and it is the shadow of the Holy One, blessed be He.⁸⁰

The profound affinity between God, name, and Torah is obvious in this passage. God forms the hidden layer of the Torah, and from this point of view He is within the Torah. However, this anthropomorphic isomorphism has an additional and very important layer since the human and divine limbs are parallel not only because they possess a similar structure but also because of

⁷⁸ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 184–190; Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, pp. 215–220; R. Isaac 'Ezovi, *Aggudat 'Ezov*, pp. 46, 81. More on commandments as *sefirot* see below, 'Concluding Remarks', section 3.

⁷⁹ On this expression see above chapter 2, notes 34–35.

⁸⁰ Ms. Jerusalem, JNUL 8^o 3925, fol. 116b; Ms. Vatican 177, fol. 24a. See also Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', pp. 66–67.

their dynamic affinities. Ritual activities, the rituals or the commandments performed by their limbs are related theurgically to the divine limbs. In other words, the realization of this isomorphism, based on knowledge and contemplation of the higher by means of the lower structure, leads from one stage to another. The relationship between contemplation and theurgy was made explicit by R. Menahem Recanati, a kabbalist inspired by the views found in the circle of *Sefer ha-Yihud*:

It behooves man to contemplate the commandments of the Torah, [to see] how many worlds he preserves by their performance and how many worlds he destroys by their neglect.⁸¹

Earlier in his introduction to the *Commentary on the Rationales of the Commandments*, he wrote:

All the sciences altogether are hinted at in the Torah, because there is nothing that is outside of it [of the Torah] [...] Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, is nothing that is outside the Torah, and the Torah is nothing that is outside Him, and this is the reason why the sages of the Kabbalah said that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Torah.⁸²

This quote was reproduced in R. Isaiah Horowitz's *ha-Shelah*, a widely read classic of somewhat more popular Kabbalah, written in the early seventeenth century.⁸³ This is a crucial example of the mapping of the supernal realm onto types of human practices; God and Torah are identical, which means that God is called by the word Torah. A fascination with the profound affinities between God, Torah and man is found in a classic of Kabbalah, written by R. Meir ibn Gabbai, an influential sixteenth-century kabbalist. He envisioned the Torah as isomorphic to both God and man, and acting as an intermediate entity:

The Torah is, therefore, the wholeness⁸⁴ of the grand and supernal Anthropos, and this is the reason why it comprises the 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments which are tantamount to the number of the limbs and sinews of the lower and supernal man [...] and since the Torah has the

⁸¹ *Commentary on the Torah*, fol. 51b.

⁸² See *Commentary on the Rationales for the Commandments*, ed. H. Liebermann, London 1962, fol. 2ab; I checked the version found in Ms. Paris, BN 825, fols. 1b-2a. On this quote see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 44, 124; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 284.

⁸³ Vol. 1, fol. 67a.

⁸⁴ *Kelal*.

shape of man it is fitting to be given to man, and man is man by virtue of it, and in the end he will cleave to Man.⁸⁵

Thus, the Torah becomes an intermediary man, a meso-anthropos: 'The intermediary which stirs the supernal image towards the lower one',⁸⁶ or, according to another passage: 'the Torah and the commandments are the intermediary which link the lower image to the supernal one, by the affinity they have with both'.⁸⁷ These quotes are simply examples of kabbalistic treatments of the Torah as the image or icon of God. Others can be found in later kabbalistic sources, and some have been analyzed elsewhere.⁸⁸ Here, however, I am concerned with the chain created by isomorphism. God, Torah and man share the same structure, and this is the reason why the scholar is able to ascend on high. This is an interesting case of a chain of anthropomorphic entities which descends from the divine and enables return there.⁸⁹

Theosophical Kabbalah developed an additional theory that is reminiscent of the Great Chain of Being. Here the lower realms are the impression, *roshem*, of the higher ones, with God at the top. *Roshem* is a rather technical term found in many sources crucial to the history of the major kabbalistic schools and in Hasidism,⁹⁰ and notably by R. Isaiah Horowitz.⁹¹ Another important theory defines the Torah of the souls of the people of Israel and considers that the Torah consists of the divine names.⁹² This triune vision enables the passage of

⁸⁵ 'Avodat ha-Qodesh, fol. 20c. For a continuous vision of reality in this book see also Ibid., fols. 11c-12b. See also Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', pp. 74-75, and R. Isaac Aizik Yehudah Safrin of Komarno, *Zohar Hai*, vol. 1, fol. 5c.

⁸⁶ Ibid., fol. 36d. See also R. Isaac Haver, *Siyah Yišqaq*, pp. 188-189, 195, 200.

⁸⁷ 'Avodat ha-Qodesh, ibidem.

⁸⁸ See Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', pp. 76-83.

⁸⁹ On the earlier sources for similar positions see Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 2004 (Hebrew).

⁹⁰ For sources that use this term see, e.g., *Zohar III*, fol. 73b; R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *Sefer Derekh Emunah*, Berlin 1850, fols. 12b-13a; R. Shimon ibn Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, Djerba 1940, fol. 181a; R. Isaac Aizik Yehudah Safrin of Komarno, *Zohar Hai*, I, fol. 105b.

⁹¹ *ha-Shelah*, I, fol 9a; II, fols. 98ab, 112b; under his influence see R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, *Penei David*, Jerusalem 1965, fol. 181b; see also the additional references in Boaz Huss, *Sockets of Fine Gold, The Kabbalah of Rabbi Shimon ibn Lavi*, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 195-196 (Hebrew).

⁹² On the emergence of this triunity see Abraham J. Heschel, 'God, Torah, and Israel', *Theology and Church in Times of Change: Essays in Honor of John C. Bennett*, ed. E. LeRoy and A. Hundry, Westminster 1970, pp. 81, 89 note 60; on the identity of

the soul, via the Torah and the divine names to God.⁹³ Below is one major example of this view:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, and the Torah and man are linked to each other [...] as the sages of truth [the kabbalists] said, the Torah is the impression of the Divinity, and man is the impression of the Torah, since the revelation of His divinity is the secret of His holy names and the Torah is, in its entirety, His names [...] The Torah consists of the souls of Israel, both the revealed Torah [...] and the primordial, preserved Torah, which is the root of the souls of the chosen few. And Man is the impression of the Torah. The vast majority, almost all of them are the impression of this revealed Torah [...] and the rank of the soul of the chosen few is from the primordial Torah'.⁹⁴

Unlike the more formalistic approaches above such as that of R. Joseph of Hamadan which presuppose some type of distance between the isomorphic elements, the discourse of this kabbalist assumes a much more organic linkage. There is something congenital in the three elements mentioned above in that the entity that causes the impression still lingers in the imprinted entity. This is why the study of the Torah is perhaps less the transcendence of a fallen plight than an actualization of a divine aspect found in man. Following a long series of sources, including R. Menahem Azariah of Fano,⁹⁵ R. Isaiah Horowitz, and ultimately ibn Gabbai, R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, a late eighteenth century Hasidic author, presents a Platonic process of ascent to the supernal source, deemed possible by the means of the Torah:

The Torah is the impression of the divinity, and the world is the impression of the Torah. When an *illuminatus* concentrates his heart, spirit and soul to divest everything in the world from materiality, and cause the embodiment of the

these three elements see Isaiah Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and Its Branches*, Jerusalem 1993, vol. 3, pp. 941-960 (Hebrew). See also the recurrent use of this expression in the early 19th century Lithuanian R. Hayyim of Volozhin in his *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*. Meanwhile, more material which includes the triple identification has surfaced: see Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 103-109, who points out several passages, including Cordoverian evidence that anticipated the eighteenth century terminology; and Moshe Idel, 'Two Remarks on R. Yair ben Sabbathai's *Sefer Hervev Piffiyot*', *Qiryat Sefer* 53 (1979), pp. 213-214 (Hebrew).

⁹³ See e.g., R. Moses Cordovero, *Shi'ur Qomah*, fol. 11c. See also R. Solomon Alqabetz, *'Ayyelet 'Ahavim*, Venice 1552, fol. 43a; R. Abraham Galante, *Qinat Setarim*, fol. 49ab; R. Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le-'Avraham*, fol. 13a; *ha-Shelah*, II, fol. 108b.

⁹⁴ *ha-Shelah*, vol. 1, fols. 9a, 11a.

⁹⁵ See *Yonat 'Elem*, ch. 1.

spiritual form [...] By his comprehension of the embodiment of the divinity, which dwells there, within the letters of the Torah, which are embodied as well in the entirety of the world, which was created with the Torah, and they animate everything. And this is the power of the *illuminatus* that he can divest himself of the material form and be clothed in the spiritual form.⁹⁶

Here the Torah serves as an intermediary between the creator and man. The letters of the Torah represent what I term the linguistic immanence of the divine within the created world.⁹⁷ The Hasidic mystic can restrict his contemplation solely to letters of the Torah and attain the divine source. The divine immanence or its extension in the Torah and hence in the world is presented in a concrete, non-symbolic manner, and serves as a scale of ascent to the divine. The descent of the divine via the letters of the Torah is an interesting kind of divine accommodation, (though not a regular one which implies attuning the message to the intellectual or moral level of the recipient). By means of linguistic immanence there is ontic accommodation involving the divine presence in the mundane sphere, not only its symbolic representation. This is the gist of another interesting passage in early Hasidism, where the unitive concern is combined with what I call the talismanic model. R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, a Hasidic master active in the second part of the eighteenth century writes:

Man must pronounce the letters while being in a state of cleaving to the ‘Primordial Speech’ through which he can draw downwards the ‘Primordial Speech’ – which is an aspect of God – to Israel in a general way. Since this is the quintessence of the revelation of the Torah, which is an aspect of God, and is in His Name, part of God is drawn and infused into the Children of Israel, by means of speech which emanates from the Primordial Speech.⁹⁸

On the same page R. Menahem Nahum writes that the ideal study of the Torah is *li-shemah*, for the sake of the letter *h*, the five locations, which is Primordial Speech'.⁹⁹ He interprets Torah study as being for the sake of the five locations where vocalizations are produced. Thus, Torah study is defined as primarily

⁹⁶ *'Or ha-Meir*, fol. 239b; see also *Ibid.*, fol. 165b, and below the quote from R. Pinhas of Koretz.

⁹⁷ See also *Ibid.*, fol. 17b and R. Hayyim Turer of Chernovitz, *Be'er Mayyim Hayyim*, Israel, ND, I, fol. 7d, etc. more on this issue see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 131-132.

⁹⁸ *Me'or Einayim*, p. 171.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

vocal, and also ideally intended to be so. In the two texts quoted above the Hebrew term translated as 'primordial speech' corresponds to the Hebrew phrase *dibbur qadmon*, an expression that is very rare, but is found in one of Abraham Abulafia's books quoted above.¹⁰⁰

In addition to luminous cords and the concept of impression, there is another view that the Torah is the shadow of God. Two kabbalists mention this divine shadow, another type of continuum.¹⁰¹

4. ECSTATIC KABBALAH: TORAH AS THE AGENT INTELLECT

Following Aristotle, Maimonides described human perfection in terms of intellectual achievement similar to the intellectual nature of God, and the Agent Intellect, a spiritual entity which is the last of the ten separate intellects, and whose nature is similar to that of God.¹⁰² Fascinatingly enough, when Maimonides, the main proponent of this comprehensive mental reinterpretation of Judaism, attacked the most important anthropomorphic theological treatise, *Shi'ur Qomah*, he attributed it to 'Greek homilists', apparently a reference to the Byzantine iconodules who emerged victorious from the fierce debate with the iconoclasts.¹⁰³ The first chapters of his *Guide of the Perplexed* are devoted to a non-corporeal definition of terms such as *selem*, *temunah*, and *panim*.¹⁰⁴ It goes without saying that the Midrashic discussions dealing with the Torah as written on the divine body described briefly above could not and indeed did not play any role in Maimonides' conceptualization of the Torah. This anti-anthropomorphic attitude, sometimes related to apophatic theology, is found in many followers of Maimonides, who was one of the primary though implicit sources for this view. R. Abraham ibn Ezra and his

¹⁰⁰ Chapter 1, section 3.

¹⁰¹ See R. Shema'yah ben Isaac ha-Levi, *Seror he-Hayyim*, Ms. Leiden 24, fols. 197bc, 198a; R. Joseph of Hamadan, in one of the passages translated above. For the view of the Divine Logos as shadow see Philo, *Leggum Allegoriae*, III:96, a passage dealt with by Mopsik, though in the context of the relation between man and God. Cf. *Les grands textes*, p. 375.

¹⁰² Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, New York 1992.

¹⁰³ On Maimonides' theology as utterly incorporeal see Warren Z. Harvey, 'The Incorporeality of God in Maimonides, Rabad, and Spinoza', *Studies in Jewish Thought*, eds. S.O. Heller Wilensky and M. Idel, Jerusalem 1989, pp. 63-78 (Hebrew).

¹⁰⁴ Part I, chs. 1,2,3,54.

followers also contributed to this cosmic understanding of the Torah.¹⁰⁵ The status of the sacred text was expanded from a book of revelation in which historical and ritual issues are paramount, to a much more comprehensive one that combines both cosmic and intellectual dimensions. A central theme in Jewish culture, Torah was identified by several philosophers with the most important entity in a philosopher's life, the Agent Intellect.¹⁰⁶

The central status of the Agent Intellect in the realm of ontology and psychology was adopted in a substantial manner by the founder of ecstatic Kabbalah, R. Abraham Abulafia, though other somewhat earlier figures, such as R. Isaac ibn Latif expressed similar views. In Abulafia's writings there are various formulations equating an intellectualistic concept of Torah with the Agent Intellect. Some discussions of this issue in his writings and his immediate sources, especially R. Barukh Togarmi, have been dealt with elsewhere.¹⁰⁷ One passage to this effect, found in an untitled manuscript of Abulafia's, is relevant here. When interpreting the verse, '*u-vaharta ba-hayyim*'.¹⁰⁸ 'thou shalt choose life' he writes that:

There is a great secret upon which a person's life depends, whose secret is the tenth angel, and it is the secret of the Torah because the [word] 'And thou shalt choose' [*u-vaharta*] equals [the numerical value of] ha-Torah. And *ba-hayyim* is a secret, and is the knowledge of the Tetragrammaton, *Yod He' Vav He'*. Behold, the secret of the Torah is life which always depends upon the Torah.¹⁰⁹

There can be no doubt that the tenth angel in this quote stands for the tenth cosmic or separate intellect, the Agent Intellect which is identical in Abulafia's system as well to the archangel Metatron. Real life, which in the context of Abulafia's writings is the life of the human intellect, depends upon the Agent Intellect; i.e. the supernal Torah. This spiritual dependence of the human upon a supernal angel is reminiscent of Muslim spirituality, which has an angelology, especially as expounded in ibn 'Arabi.¹¹⁰ However, immersed as Abulafia was in

¹⁰⁵ Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham ibn Ezra's Thought*, Ramat Gan 1999, pp. 198-199 (Hebrew).

¹⁰⁶ See Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, pp. 149, 193.

¹⁰⁷ Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 29-46.

¹⁰⁸ Deuter. 30:19.

¹⁰⁹ Ms. Firenze-Laurentiana II.48, fol. 32a.

¹¹⁰ On mystical potentials of this concept in medieval philosophy see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 349 notes 26,27. For the mystical overtones of this concept in Islamic

numerical types of exegesis he based his passage on the identity of 'life' — the sublime attainment of the Intellect—and union with the divine name, because *be-hayyim* and the numerical value of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton plus their plain spelling both equal 70 or 71.

In his major handbook *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, where his most widespread mystical techniques are found, the ecstatic kabbalist describes the tenth sphere, a term for the Agent Intellect, as follows:

But the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it; and the secret of this excellency is the entirety of the Torah; and the secret of the Torah, the tenth sphere, will preserve the life of him who has it, the masters of resurrection.¹¹¹

Life, 'real' life is, as seen above, an allegory for the act of intellection which ensures the immortality of the soul, and is related to the Agent Intellect in many medieval sources. Here it is explicitly related to the Torah. In fact according to another text, the Torah exists in the human intellectual apparatus,¹¹² thus creating an intellectual continuum between God, the agent intellect and the human intellect, the latter two being the Torah. In one of his commentaries on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he states that:

The soul is a portion of the Divinity and within it there are 231 gates, [*yesh r'al*] and it is called 'the congregation of Israel' that collects and gathers into herself the entire community, under its power of intellect, which is called the 'supernal congregation of Israel' the mother of providence, being the cause of the providence, the intermediary¹¹³ between us and God. This is the Torah, the result of the effluence of the twenty-two letters.¹¹⁴

mysticism see in the various studies by Henri Corbin, especially his *Alone with the Alone*, Princeton 1998.

¹⁰⁻¹¹, 17-18, 80, idem, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, Kegan Paul International, London 1983, p. 76.

¹¹¹ Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1582, fol. 80a; Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 39.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 49, the quote from 'Oşar 'Eden Ganuz.

¹¹³ *ha-'emsat*. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 165 note 47; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 607 note 41.

¹¹⁴ *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 155b, translated in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 38. Compare also R. Dov Baer of Medzerich, 'Or Torah, Jerusalem 1968, pp. 58-59, and to the early nineteenth century R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov,

This is a rather uncharacteristic passage in Abulafia's kabbalistic thought. Abulafia's system, as pointed out several times above, deals with the intellect, not the soul, and the concept of the divinity of the soul is extremely bizarre in the Aristotelian or Maimonidean systems which Abulafia shared to a very great extent. I assume that here, as in some other cases, this is a vestige of an earlier tradition that was not sufficiently honed to his way of thought. In any case, the soul is conceived of as a portion of the divinity in a way similar to Neoplatonism and theosophical Kabbalah. This divine soul also harbors the 231 gates, which point to the primordial Torah, and Abulafia indeed mentions the Torah explicitly at the end of the passage. Moreover, either Abulafia or his source did not intend to refer to human souls in general but the souls of the people of Israel for two reasons. The term *Knesset Yisrael* occurs twice in the passage, and in the words '231 gates' (in Hebrew *RL*), whose consonants are part of the word *Yisrael*, as Abulafia and the young Gikatilla emphasized so many times in their writings. In fact, these 231 combinations of two Hebrew letters may reflect a certain repetition of the paradigmatic and creative combinations which God used, according to the *Sefer Yesirah*, to make the world. The double use of the 231 combinations — by God in the process of creation of the world, and by man in order to attain a mystical experience — lend weight to my argument that there are affinities between the techniques and the supernal world to which the mystic attempts to adhere to, as we saw in chapter 1, section 3.

Moreover, it is more than likely that the two occurrences of the term *Knesset Yisrael* stand for both the human intellect and the supernal one, which is identical with the Agent Intellect.¹¹⁵ The feminine terminology used by Abulafia to designate the Agent Intellect is also unusual in his mystical axiology, where the source of knowledge is conceived of, metaphorically, to be masculine. Perhaps the use of such a reference has to do with an earlier theosophical kabbalistic source whose way of thinking differed considerably from Abulafia's. This quote suggests a tri-unity composed of God, the soul of Israel, and the Torah, similar to the famous but much later equation, *quedesha' berikh hu*, '*orayyta' vi-yisrael – ḥad hu*', discussed in the previous paragraph. Also here, the importance of the kabbalist's actions in actualizing this potential tri-unity is clear. The Torah can also play an intermediary role in the process of union

Menahem Sion, Jerusalem 1987, p. 18, in a text reminiscent of R. Abraham Abulafia's thought. See also *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹⁵ On the term *Knesset Yisrael* as a metaphor for the supernal intellect, as well as for the human spiritual power in ecstatic Kabbalah see above, chapter 1, section 2.

between the human and the divine intellect:

And human love cannot share in the divine save after much study of Torah and much attainment of wisdom, and after having received prophecy, and this is the secret of *ḥatan* [bridegroom]: Torah, [the letter] *tav*, between *ḥen*¹¹⁶ – Wisdom [*Hokhmah*] on its right and Prophecy [*nevu'ah*] on its left.¹¹⁷

This passage describes another form of tri-unity. Divine and human love, (which represent human and divine intellects) are connected through the study of the Torah, wisdom and prophecy, which are all acts of intellection. Here, Aristotelian noetics on the identity of the intellect, the intelligible and the act of intellection are added to conceptualize the union between the human and the divine. This sequence created by Abulafia is remarkable in that Torah study is only the second of three stages which culminate in prophecy. In other words, it apparently ranks low in the process of intellection which end in direct contact with the divine. Elsewhere in one of his prophetic books written around 1280, he redefines the meaning of the Torah in emotional terms:

I innovate a new Torah within the holy nation, which is my people Israel. My honorable Name is like a new Torah, and it has not been explained to my people since the day I hid my face from them.¹¹⁸

Similar to certain passages in the previous chapter, the concept of Torah is integrated into the system of the new Kabbalah: it is part of the technique to reach the divine through combinations of letters. One of the most ingenious assimilations of the concept of Torah to its letters and their combinations as part of a vision that the world and the mystic are within the Torah is found as well in *Sitrei Torah*.

The twenty-two letters of the Torah are the *sanctum sanctorum* [holy of holies] on which it was written at the end of *Tractate Avot* what our sages, blessed be their memory, said:¹¹⁹ ‘The Son of Bag Bag said: Turn it and turn it because everything is in it and you are within it in its entirety, and you shall see in it and

¹¹⁶ Grace. This word emerges as the acronym of the first letters of the two Hebrew words *Hokhmah* and *Nevu'ah*.

¹¹⁷ *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, Ms. München 58, fol. 323a.

¹¹⁸ Ms Roma-Angelica 38, fol. 37a. More on this quote and its possible implications see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 306–307.

¹¹⁹ Ch. 5:26–27. On the peculiar version of *Avot* used by Abulafia, see Charles Taylor, *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*, Cambridge 1897, pp. 60, 69. See also *Ethics of the Fathers*, tr. Hyman Goldin, New York 1962, pp. 89–90.

you shall not stray from it, because there is no better virtue¹²⁰ than it. And the Son of He' He' said: The retribution is in accordance to the sorrow. And see what the Rabbi, blessed be His Memory commented in his commentary.¹²¹ But we received and we indubitably know that the two double names which were mentioned at the end of the above mentioned spiritual treatise which was composed according to the views of the great Rabbis, the saints of the earth, blessed be their memory, are double in order to disclose wondrous secrets. And after they warned us about all the good virtues and every intellectual rank, they returned to clarify the purpose of the intention and hinted to us the secret of the combination of the twenty-two letters, and said that the entire world is within the Torah and we are all of us in the Torah and from within it we see and from it we do not stray, and there is no better virtue than this.¹²²

One of the clues to the above passage is the interpretation of the double names of the Tannaitic figures quoted in Tractate Avot, Bag Bag and He' He', which in *gematria* add up to 22, which is the number of Hebrew letters. This highly uncommon exegetical move is accompanied by another radical interpretation: the verb *hafokh* translated above as 'turn' means in the specific rabbinic context 'to be preoccupied with, to be immersed in the study of the Torah', unlike Abulafia who takes it to mean 'turned upside down' through combinations of letters. By combining letters the mystic becomes aware of the comprehensive nature of the Torah not only as a semantic field, i.e. a place where all the possible meanings are preserved, but more as an ontic structure which encompasses the universe and man together. By immersing himself in the combinatory process, the ecstatic kabbalist becomes part of the Torah and it is integrated within him. This assimilation to the Torah is comparable to the taking of theophoric names by ecstatic kabbalists, and seeing Moses as the divine Glory, as discussed in chapter 2. It should be stressed that in ecstatic Kabbalah the Torah is related to the combination of letters several times as though this technique was the real message of the Torah. For example, R. Elnathan ben Moses Qalqish wrote in mid-fourteenth century Constantinople:

God, may He be praised, gave us the Holy Torah, and taught us the way of combination [of letters] and the steps of the ladder, in describing the letters, in

¹²⁰ *Middah*. See the occurrence of the word in Job 11:9. See also Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 517 note 67.

¹²¹ See Maimonides' *Commentary on 'Avot'*, ad locum.

¹²² *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fols. 169b-170a. For a more detailed analysis of this passage in its fuller context see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 438-448.

seeing that it is not within the ability of our apprehension to attain knowledge of Him, may He be blessed, without this great and correct proposal [...] for [...] from the light and seraphic sphere of the intellect, there shall be born the image of the prophetic image, which is the intention of combination [of letters].^[123]

R. Joseph Gikatilla, an early student of R. Abraham Abulafia, writes about combinatory practices similar to those used by Abulafia:

By the mixture ['eiruv] of these six letters [the consonants of the word *Bereshit*^[124]] with each other, and the profound understanding of their permutation and combination, the prophets and visionaries penetrated the secrets of the Torah, and [...] no one is capable of comprehending the end of these things, except God alone [...] it is incumbent on man to meditate upon the structures of the Torah, which depend upon the Wisdom of God and no one is able to [understand] one [parcel] of the thousands of thousands of immense [secrets] which depend upon part of one letter of the letters of the Torah.^[125]

Meditation on the letters of the Torah, not its messages, is a way of reaching divine wisdom. *Ars combinatoria* is a path toward partial comprehension of the secrets of the Torah. It bears clear similarity to Abulafia's sixth path of interpretation of Torah which deals with the restitution of the letters to their hylic state and then recombines them.^[126] He describes this advanced form of interpretation as the 'wisdom of letter-combinations', a term which resurfaced in other kabbalistic and Hasidic texts apparently influenced by him. What is paramount to establishing the association between this passage and ecstatic Kabbalah is the clear-cut relationship between prophets, visionaries and combinations of letters. Moreover, the 'structures of the Torah' represent, as pointed out by Gikatilla, not merely literary registers but divine wisdom; i.e. by understanding the Torah a person can ascend towards divine wisdom. In this passage, as well as in his *Sha'arei 'Orah*, there is a linguo-theosophy; a vision of theosophy structured by linguistic categories arranged in a hierarchical order from the lower realm to the highest divine plane.

These passages, like many others, demonstrate the profound phenomenological divergences between theosophical-theurgical and ecstatic

¹²³ 'Even Scppir, Ms. Paris BN 727, fol. 10a. See also R. Isaac of Acre, quoted in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 115.

¹²⁴ 'In the beginning'.

¹²⁵ *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud*, reproduced in 'Arzei Levanon, Venice 1601, fols. 39b-40a (Hebrew).

¹²⁶ See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 97-101.

Kabbalah. Whereas for the latter graphic issues were very important, for the former the esoteric meaning, which aimed at intellectual comprehension, a mystical intuition, or a prophetic revelation was the ultimate goal of study. In general, according other works by Abulafia the lowest form of obtaining knowledge consists of studying written books.

5. HASIDISM: ELEVATING MAN TO GOD, AND DRAWING GOD TO MAN

Eighteenth century Hasidism fostered a variety of theologies. An immanentist position was highly popular, but many Hasidic masters had transcendental views, which culminated in a vision of the divine as the supernal Nought. Mystical techniques varied as a function of these different forms of theology. The immanentist position took a more cognitive approach and was more oriented towards discovering the underlying divine substratum of reality, which also involved personal transformation. The transcendentalist approach required the mystic to practice self-abnegation; i.e. to eliminate the egoistic side of his personality to achieve a status similar to the divine. The study of the Torah and prayer was seen as a means to integrate oneself into the divine. Such a view is found in an influential Hasidic text, authored by the founder of Hasidism. The Besht recommended that:

during your prayer and your study [of the Torah] you shall comprehend and unify each and every sound and utterance of your lips, because in each and every [pronounced] letter there are worlds and souls and divinity and they ascend and combine and unify with each other and with the Godhead and afterwards they [the sounds] combine and unify in a perfect union with the Godhead, and the soul¹²⁷ will be integrated [into the Godhead] with them'.¹²⁸

The assumption is that recitation of the canonical texts, if performed with

¹²⁷ i.e. your soul.

¹²⁸ *Epistle on the Ascent of the Soul*, ed. Y. Mondschein, *Shivhei Ha-Baal Shem Tov*, A Facsimile of a Unique Manuscript Jerusalem 1982, pp. 235-236 (Hebrew). For numerous traces of the triune view of the Besht see, e.g., 'Or ha-'Emmet, fol. 18a; R. Israel of Kuznitz, 'Avodat Israel, Munkacz 1928, fol. 97a. Compare Jacobs, *The Hasidic Prayer*, pp. 75-77, 97 and R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or Einayim*, p. 161, R. Abraham of Kalisk in *Peri ha-'Ares*, Epistles, rpr. Jerusalem 1969, p. 81; R. Qalonimus Qalman Epstein, *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, I, fol. 21ab; R. Asher Tzevi of Ostraha, *Ma'ayan Hokhmah*, Podgorze 1897, fol. 84c, R. Yehudah Arieh Leib of Gur, *Sefat 'Emmet*, IV, fols. 33bd; R. Isaac Aiziq Safrin of Komarno, *Heikhal ha-Berakhah*, Lemberg 1869, III, fol. 25c. See also below the quote from R. Aharon Kohen of Apt.

enthusiasm and devotion, involves an integration of aspects of the human soul into the utterances, which ascend and join the divinity. Within these letters the different realms of reality are found, a view that may explain the way in which the Hasidic master understood the possibility of interaction. The coexistence here below of these realms may explain how these sounds can serve as vehicles for the sparks of the human souls and facilitate their integration into the divine. This does not depend on the mystic's knowledge or cognitive intention, as is often the case in Kabbalah, but like certain magical trends in Kabbalah, achievement is a matter of energetic performance. The Besht is reported to have said that:

A person who reads the Torah, and sees the lights of the letters [or of the sounds] which are in the Torah, even if he does not properly know the cantillations [of the biblical text], because of his reading with great love and with enthusiasm, God does not deal with him strictly, even if he does not properly pronounce them [i.e. the cantillations].¹²⁹

According to this text as well, the divinity is already present in the letters, and the mystic, or the simple man is merely called upon to contemplate it. There is a fascinating discussion on this point by R. Pinhas Shapira of Koretz, a disciple of the Besht. According to R. Shapira:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah, the entire world was filled with the Torah [...] and the Torah and the Holy One blessed be He, are one.¹³⁰ Now there is nothing in which the Torah is not within. This is the meaning of [the verse]:¹³¹ 'Know Him in all your ways'. And whoever says that the Torah is one thing and the things of this world are another is a heretic'.¹³²

The Hasidic master is not only referring to an extreme case of linguistic immanence, but rather connects it to one of the most representative Hasidic modes of action: finding God everywhere. The entire world is enchanted by the Torah, and comprehensive vision of the Torah allows for an intimacy on a more personal level. According to the same master, 'Everyone finds himself in the

¹²⁹ *Liqquṭim Yeqarim*, Jerusalem 1981, fol. 1a; idem, 'Or ha-'Emmet', fol. 83d. See Joseph Weiss, 'Talmud-Torah le-Shiṭat R. Israel Besht', *Essays Presented to the Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie*, London 1967, p. 161 (Hebrew part).

¹³⁰ See above, section 3.

¹³¹ Proverbs 3:6.

¹³² *Midrash Pinhas*, fol. 23b. See also above the passage of R. Zeev Wolf of Zhitomir, and in R. Yehudah Arieh Leib of Gur, *Sefat 'Emmet*, IV, fol. 44a

Torah in accordance with what he is'.¹³³ The strong emphasis on immanence is striking: whoever denies it is labeled a heretic, which is a highly dramatic expression in Hasidic writings. One of the intended addressees may be no other than R. Elijah da Vidas, who describes holiness in terms of total detachment from 'things of this world'.¹³⁴

This immanent vision of the letters of the Torah does not require mental exercise or extensive mystical knowledge. Unlike the theosophical debates, especially those cited above from the writings of R. Joseph of Hamadan where intricate correspondences between the higher and lower realms are part of secret knowledge, here there is a simple, naive approach: the divine lights may be found within the letters of a text and can be contemplated by anyone wishing to do so, and according to R. Pinhas, they are found everywhere, and can be found there as well.

Although the Besht's principle of reaching God via the Torah suggests an ascent, his students emphasized that the attraction of the divine into canonical sounds precedes union with God. Nevertheless, there are instances in which the Besht did assume drawing down the divine into the letters.¹³⁵ The Besht's most influential disciple, the Great Maggid of Medzerich, formulated the divine immanence in the letters of the Torah with Lurianic imagery that he reinterpreted in an innovative manner:

He [i.e. God] may be blessed, concentrated Himself into the Torah; therefore, when someone speaks on issues of Torah or prayer, let him do it with all his power, since by it [i.e. the utterance] he unites himself with Him, may He be blessed, since all his power is in the spoken letter, and He, may He be blessed, dwells in the spoken letter.¹³⁶

This master was quoted by one of his followers to the effect that:

He [God] contracted Himself within the letters of the Torah, by means of which he has created the world [...] and the *Saddiq*, who studies the Torah for its own sake, in [a state of] holiness, draws downwards the Creator, blessed be He into the letters of the Torah just as at the moment of creation [...] and by pure

¹³³ Ibid., fol. 23a.

¹³⁴ See *Reshit Hokhmah*, the Gate of Repentance, chapter 2.

¹³⁵ See above chapter 2 note 137 in Pedaya's article.

¹³⁶ 'Or ha-'Emmet, fols. 15b-17a.

utterances, related to the study of the Torah, he draws God down into the letters.¹³⁷

Here, divine transcendence is implied in the concept of infinity which is characteristic of the state of the deity before the moment of creation. Infinity is attenuated by an act of contraction; i.e. a self-limitation of the divinity within particular letters of the Torah, and this serves as the paradigm for the subsequent creation of the world. This is an innovative understanding of the concept of divine *śimšum*. In kabbalistic and especially the Lurianic traditions this term refers to the act of retraction of the divine substance or light from a certain limited space to allow for the emergence of the created universe. According to other traditions, God contracted himself within a certain specific point or space. In both cases, this forms part of theogonic and cosmogonic processes. However, these more ontologically oriented traditions were radically reinterpreted to highlight the implications of a human relationship to God. As a cosmogonical paradigm, the Hebrew letters are also a reification of the divine in His contracted aspect. The Torah as revealed to man, when studied by the perfecti, serves as a tool for the re-creation of cosmogonic acts: study elicits and reproduces the first constitutive moments of the world by invoking the divinity in the letters. However, as is explicitly indicated in the text above, what is crucial is not the hieroglyphic or the scriptural features of the letters, but rather their utterance; i.e., the utterance of each of the letters by the righteous involved in the process.

In addition to the Divine contraction, another important pattern is also present the quote; namely the drawing down of the Divine into the letters of the sacred text.¹³⁸ This notion was developed in a fascinating manner by the grandson of the Besht, who was well acquainted with the Besht's views. R. Moshe Ḥayyim Efrayim of Sudylkov writes as follows:

¹³⁷ R. 'Elimelekh of Lisansk, *No'am 'Elimelekh*, fol. 8a. Compare also to R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me'or 'Einayim*, p. 208; R. Dov Baer of Medzherich, *'Or Torah*, p. 113; R. Aharon ha-Levi of Zhitomir, *Toledot 'Aharon*, vol. 2, fol. 36b; R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *'Or ha-Meir*, fol. 201c and in the passage from his book quoted below. The pure utterances mentioned in this quote have something to do with the religious attitude mentioned in R. Elijah da Vidas' texts, under the influence of Cordovero's thought. See above, chapter 1, section 3.

¹³⁸ This view is found in several medieval and Renaissance sources; see Moshe Idel, Introduction to the facsimile edition of Rabbi Joseph Al-Ashqar's *Saphnat Pa'anéah*, Jerusalem 1991, pp. 43–46 (Hebrew). See also Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 171–188.

By study and involvement with the Torah for its own sake [or name], he can vivify his soul and amend his 248 limbs and 365 sinews, [and] cleave himself to their root, and to the root of their root which is the Torah and God [or the Tetragrammaton] blessed be He [...] all of this is [achieved] by the study of Torah for its own sake [or name] and for the sake of asking from the letters themselves, and I heard the interpretation of the Besht [...] from 'the secret of God' which is in them, which ['the secret of God'] will help them [the students of Torah] to speak the letters with a firm interpretation 'for its own sake'.¹³⁹

This identification of Torah, God and Man is reminiscent of ibn Gabba'i's view cited earlier, though the characteristically Hasidic emphasis on letters dominates here. Later on in this book we read:

How is it possible to take the Holy One, may He be blessed, as if He will dwell upon man? It is by means of the Torah which is indeed the names of God, since He and His name are one unity, and when someone studies the Torah for the sake of God and to keep His commandments and abstains from what is prohibited, and utters the letters of the Torah, which are the names of God, by these [activities] he takes God indeed and it is as though the Divine Presence dwells upon him as it is written:¹⁴⁰ 'in all the places where I utter the name of God', which is the holy Torah, which is in its entirety His names, then 'I will come unto thee and I will bless thee'.¹⁴¹

In another important passage written by a contemporary of the Rabbi of Sudylkov, this drawing down is accomplished through the special feature of the biblical text, which in numerous kabbalistic and Hasidic sources is believed to constitute a continuum of divine names. This was the view of R. Aharon Kohen of Apt, a late eighteenth century Hasidic compilator very close to Lubavitch Hasidism. In his eclectic commentary on the Pentateuch, '*Or ha-Ganuz le-Saddiqim*', he emphasizes the creation of the world by divine speech, and writes that it is incumbent upon man, likewise:

Before uttering a speech of the Torah or prayer, to direct [his thought] to the fact that the Holy One, Blessed be He, and the Torah are [both] one. Thus, in these words that he speaks, the light of the divinity is preserved there and it is the soul of the entire world, because the Torah and its letters is the soul of the entire world, because by means of the letters of the Torah and its names and

¹³⁹ *Degel Mahaneh 'Efrayim*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁰ Exodus 20:21.

¹⁴¹ *Degel Mahaneh 'Efrayim*, pp. 119-120.

their combinations, all the parts of the world were created.¹⁴² By speech performed in holiness in matters of Torah he awakens the reparation and the union of all the parts of the worlds and the souls, so that they are united to the divinity and this is what is written¹⁴³ ‘and you shall take me as an offering’, the commentary of Rashi is ‘to my name’ whose meaning is that people should study Torah for its name, in order to draw Me to My name, which is the Torah, which is in its entirety the names of the Holy One, blessed be He [...] and this is why the reader of the Torah is called a reader, because he calls the Holy One, blessed be He, he is like a man who calls his father by his name. This is similar to the son of the king who is in pain and calls to his father by many cognomens: ‘My father’, ‘My Lord’, ‘My King’, ‘My Master’, etc., until the father has mercy on his son. So too the reader of the Torah by an immense *kavvanah*, that all the words of the Torah are the cognomens of God, in addition to those cognomens that are known [...] and by the greatness of the awe and cleaving, he draws Him down, Blessed be He, to His names, which are the words and the expressions of the Torah and of prayer, the mercy of God is arisen in him, and this is the meaning of ‘and they should take Me’ – to My name, namely to draw Me down to My name.¹⁴⁴

Though he does not mention his source, R. Aharon relies on a theory that organizes the biblical lexicon according to a certain scheme developed by R. Joseph Gikatilla in his *Sefer Sha'arei 'Orah*. According to Gikatilla, there is a hierarchy between the divine name, at the top, and the ten divine names derived from it, and the cognomens depending on these ten divine names, and the cognomens of the cognomens. On the basis of this hierarchical structure, any word in the Bible is somehow related to the divine name, and thus describes the divine being. This position is appropriated by the Hasidic master who transforms the abstract kabbalistic literary theory into an explanation of the Torah as an imploration. By reading the biblical text out loud, even when dealing with pericopes in which mundane issues occur, the reader is unconsciously speaking about God, and perhaps calling him. The reader of the Torah is thus someone who supplicates, rather than coerces.¹⁴⁵ Reading the Torah out loud and the recitation of the words of prayer actually become almost

¹⁴² On this view see above, chapter 1, section 3 in the quote from the book of *Tanya*.

¹⁴³ Exodus 25:2.

¹⁴⁴ Lemberg 1850, col. VI, fol. 4b-col. 7, fol. 1a.

¹⁴⁵ On ‘callers’ who cause the descent of the supernal pneuma by means of ‘enchanting songs’ and ‘ineffable words’ see Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, ed. M. Tardieu, Paris 1978, p. 47.

identical activities. This blurring of the boundaries between two distinct modes of religious activity is a very prominent tendency in Hasidism. This blurring also prompts another between the recitant, the text and the author. I assume that R. Aharon Kohen of Apta is presumably referring to the triune vision of the Besht mentioned above. In this scheme the Torah is seen as a cosmic soul, or the soul of the world, which mediates between God and the world, and its study may function as a mode of union with it, and via it to God. Another possible explanation for the appearance of this subject in the text may be the immanence of the soul of the world within the world, and this more weakly mediating interpretation may reflect a linguistic immanence of God via the Torah, a position that is more congruent with R. Pinhas of Koretz.

It is reasonable to assume that R. Aharon of Apta's use of the theme of 'taking God', which is also found in the master of Sudylkov's passage, is the mark of an earlier tradition shared by the two authors independently. A rather interesting situation emerges from the use of this verb. In two biblical cases, the root *LQH* designates the taking of two humans – Enoch and Elijah – to the supernal realm while they were still alive. The religious center is the Bible (which is God), and man is drawn to His horizon. However, with the emergence of a magical technique, God is attracted, i.e. taken, into the human domain. However, this taking is completely unrelated to imprisoning the divine by manipulating His name. God's presence in the human domain changes the human domain and the individual completely. It is not an invasion, but something more like an invitation which cannot be refused. The divine substance changes the nature of the realm into which it is drawn.

A disciple of the Great Maggid, R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, put forward a view similar to his master, but adds some interesting points drawn from R. Joseph Gikatilla's linguo-theosophy:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, has concentrated the strength of His luminosity within the letters of the Torah and within the combinations of names and within the attributes of the cognomens, in order [to enable us] to perceive His magnitude, and to call Him by names, in order to draw down [*le-hamshikh*] His providence onto the creatures by means of the combinations of names.¹⁴⁶

Divine activity in primordial times is related, as was the case in earlier sources, to letters, names and their combinations. These highly linguistic structures enable the Hasidic masters to draw down the divine influx. Initially comprising

¹⁴⁶ 'Or ha-Meir, fol. 240c and see also Ibid., fol. 247cd.

Himself in letters, God allows the mystic to perceive His magnitude, and even to draw him down into the letters or sounds uttered by human beings.

R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, one of the most well known masters of Hasidism and whose books are studied to this day in some circles states:

To understand how the reader of the stories of deeds, [that are found] in the Torah [*Sippurei ma'asiyot she-ba-Torah*] is connected to the Life of the World,¹⁴⁷ according to what is written in [the book of] *Kavvanot*, fol. 16b, [you should know that] just as man is preoccupied here below [with the Torah], so is the configuration of the supernal man on the high, etc., and so it is [the case] insofar as the rumination [*hirhurim*] on the written letters [is concerned]. However, regarding the utterance, it should be said that it cuts a path through and ascends to the [world of] Emanation itself, or to the [world of] Creation by the means of intellectual Awe and Love, or to [the world of] Formation, by means of natural Awe and Love, and by means of the *Miqra'* it ascends from this world to the ten *sefirot* of Making, because it cuts off the airs etc. This is, [however] not the case insofar as rumination is concerned, which [affects] but the [supernal] configuration, which is the root of his soul etc. And what is written in the *Zohar* III, fol. 105¹⁴⁸ that rumination does not affect anything [...] the thought remains there and adds there a great light, by the addition and the multiplicity of the light within [the world of] Emanation by means of *Miqra'* and the practical commandments in [the world of] Making. The quintessence of the unification is on the high, but its fruits [alone] refract on the lower world, by means of the drawing of a little bit of light from the Small [Configuration] [*Za'ir*] downwards, by means of utterance and deeds, this not being the case of rumination, which does not draw down anything.¹⁴⁹

R. Shneur Zalman of Liady accepts the medieval axiology that thought is higher than both deeds and speech in this passage. Thought, *maḥashavah*, alone is able to reach the highest world of Emanation, and has a certain impact on the augmentation of the light within this realm. Thus, theurgy; i.e. actions concerning the divine realms, is a matter of thought, which is conceived of as operating on high. However, the magical act of drawing down a small part of the light is possible only by means of religious speech and deeds. Theurgy, presented here in rather mentalistic terms, unlike what we have seen above

¹⁴⁷ Namely how the reader is linked to God.

¹⁴⁸ Indeed, in *Zohar*, III fol. 105a, the view is exposed that ruminations do not affect anything in the supernal world because they do not ascend.

¹⁴⁹ *Tanya, Quntres Aharon*, fol. 153a-b.

from his *Liqqutei Torah*, is a precondition for magic, which may or may not follow the enhancing of the light within the divine realm. These two effects on extra-human worlds are dependent upon different acts performed by man.

The occurrence of the term *Miqra'* twice is important to the understanding of the passage as a whole. Performance of the *Miqra'* is the instrument for the ascent to the first, i.e. the lowest of the four worlds characteristic of later Kabbalah. From this point of view, it is certainly not the most sublime of religious acts. However, it alone ensures the effective connection between human needs and the supernal energy that can facilitate their attainment. According to this passage the essence of religious attainment is not magical but theurgical, the former is but a secondary benefit. More abstract study of the Torah reaches the stage of the highest world, but more mundane needs are achieved by more material acts. The synthesis between the magical and the mystical moments, which was more organic in the writings of R. Shneur Zalman's predecessors mentioned above, is less visible in his own thought. Though the initiator of a much more intellectualistic trend in Hasidism, he remains more faithful to the medieval axiology found in the writings of the philosophers as to the superiority of thought over deeds. Because of the inconsistency between the emphasis upon the superiority of thought, which alone affects the highest realm within the divine according to the passage from the *Tanya*', in contrast to the view expressed in *Liqqutei Torah* where speech and letters stem from the highest *sefirah*, the latter takes a stand that is much closer to views expressed in his entourage, while the former expresses more his own independent approach, which is more inclined toward mentalism. The more magical approach found in the *Liqqutei Torah* presumes not only a nexus between language and the highest *sefirah* but also between language and the drawing down. While the founder of *Habad* does not emphasize the thaumaturgical aspect of language, one of his followers does so. The notion of coercing the divine by uttering Torah-letters and names seems to reflect a somewhat earlier Hasidic position. In a set of traditions stemming from the circle of the Great Maggid, we find what seems to me to be the most magical of formulations that related the voiced Torah with an impact on God:

God has, so to speak, contracted himself into the Torah. When someone calls a man by his name, he puts all his affairs aside and answers the person who called him, because he is compelled to¹⁵⁰ by his name. Likewise God has, so to

¹⁵⁰ *She-hu' asur bi-shemo.*

speak, contracted himself into the Torah, and the Torah is his name¹⁵¹ and when someone calls the Torah, they draw God, blessed be He, down toward us, because He and His name are one total unity with us.¹⁵²

On the one hand, this passage refers to the identity of God and His name, as found in many earlier sources.¹⁵³ On the other hand it takes advantage of the double meaning of the Hebrew root *QR'*: to call and to read. Reading the Torah is understood as tantamount to calling, or conjuring God by His name, in fact compelling him to come down upon the mystic as invocator. A mystical experience of union is then achieved between the conjured divine power and the conjurer.

The way the concept of *śimshum* is used needs to be clarified here. God's primordial contraction of the infinite into a small space constitutes the starting point of the Hasidic masters' capability to bring Him down. This magical understanding of inducing the divine presence in a contracted manner contradicts the basic view of contraction as a primordial act which is dominant in Lurianic Kabbalah. Elsewhere in the same treatise, the Great Maggid emphasizes the need to call, or read, i.e. to recite the Bible with all one's power, to become one with God, because He 'dwells in the letter [...] and his intellect, which is from the world of the intellect, becomes a limb of the *Shekhinah*'.¹⁵⁴ The 'limb of the *Shekhinah*' is not a new term in Jewish mysticism; it had a considerable history starting from the mid-thirteenth century.¹⁵⁵ It assumes the possibility of being integrated into the divine organism by means of utterances. However, this 'limb' is none other than the human intellect which is conceived of in anthropomorphic terms. The question is whether there is a difference between the dwelling of God within language as part of a ritualistic process which attracts Him there, and the divine presence, which is understood in terms of intellect, a view which may suggest the ascent of the intellect to the

¹⁵¹ See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 39-41; Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah', pp. 49-52.

¹⁵² 'Or ha-'Emmet, fol. 14c. See also the texts collected and discussed in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 180-182.

¹⁵³ See above, chapter 2, section 1.

¹⁵⁴ 'Or ha-'Emmet, fol. 15a. See also ibidem, fol. 39c, quoted in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 168-169. See also his *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 51 where the soul is conceived of as the limb of the *Shekhinah* and a drop of the divine sea, and ibidem, p. 50 where the commandment is described as a limb of the *Shekhinah*.

¹⁵⁵ See the Ashkenazi text printed by Gershon Scholem, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, Tel Aviv 1948, p. 222.

supernal world of intellect. Here presumably there is a double cord: one which attracts God down into sounds, and another one – itself a combination of Neo-Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism – which suggests the movement upward.

The phrase *'asur bi-shemo* means, figuratively, that God is imprisoned in or bound by His Name. The notion that God is bound is reminiscent of a verse in the Song of Songs (7:6) where the king, understood in many Jewish texts to be an allegory for God, is caught or bound. The same verb *'asur* is used for braids. By oral reading of the Torah, or more exactly by its ritual recitation, the divine names in the sacred text become invocations or incantations, in a manner akin to the passage above by R. Aharon Kohen of Apt. It is the automatic efficacy of the performance that turns the reading of the Torah into a mystical technique which also has magical repercussions. More than in the 'colder' kabbalistic forms of the use of Torah and the divine name as technical ways to reach divinity, the Hasidic modes are much 'warmer'—in other words, love, reverence, devotion and enthusiasm are involved.

This more magical view of the divine names here and in many other cases, calls for a more energetic interpretation of Hasidism, which scholars consider to be a prime feature of Hasidism as a mystical system. Divine names played an important role not only in the magical activities of the Hasidic masters, but was also part of their more comprehensive worldviews.¹⁵⁶

Let us turn now to R. Isaac Aizic Haver, a mid-nineteenth century major kabbalist, and follower of the Lithuanian tradition which was very critical of Hasidism. In his *Siyah Yišaq*, he describes in a rather dualistic manner the opposition between the supernal light and purity and the lower darkness and the evil inclination. In order to save the sons of Israel from the dire consequences of ordeals in this world:

God, blessed be He, made a chain which is linked to each of the souls of the Israelites in order to help him to purify himself, to leave behind the impurity that clings to him. And the end of this chain is the holy Torah, which links heaven and earth together [...] and all the four letters of the Great and Awesome Name dwell upon each Israelite and this is the chain that is fixed in the soul of

¹⁵⁶ More on this issue see 'Concluding Remarks'.

the Israelites, by means of which he is confident that the light which is in it [the Torah] will cause him to repent [...] and draw holiness upon him.¹⁵⁷

This seminal passage combines various roles of the Torah: it is a cosmic power, marrying heaven and earth, but also supplies the rituals which ensure the redemption of man from the darkness of this world. The Torah is assumed to be identical to the divine name which also dwells in man, a much earlier tradition found in several kabbalistic books¹⁵⁸ and, according to an additional statement found in the same context, God says that 'They are linked to the root of the holiness by the Torah that was given to them which is the above mentioned chain since I am linked within you, by my Great Name which is linked within you'.¹⁵⁹ The basic form of immanence here is the structured linguistic one: the name or the Torah. Unlike the Hasidic masters who expanded the spectrum of holiness to Hebrew letters in general, Ḥaver confines the manner of divine immanence to the Torah and the divine name alone. However, what is crucial here is the absence of the magical aspects which are so easy to see in the quotes above from Hasidic literature: indeed, drawing down is found in this text, but it is less a matter of coercing God than one of hallowing man. In any case, R. Isaac Ḥaver's discussion demonstrates that strong affinity between man, the technique of the Torah, and the experience of God all are tightly linked. Though the basic situation is engineered from above, human activity is nevertheless important: purification is facilitated, though not dictated by the structure of the world. In other words, the main processes described above can be seen as part of a broader metabolic conception; i.e. as an exchange of energy between different planes of reality, the supernal linguo-theosophy and linguovert anthropology, which are isomorphic from the point of view of their linguistic nature.

6. MISHNAH-STUDY AND MISHNAH-APPEARANCE

After the books of the Bible, the Mishnah is considered to be not only a canonical text but also one which was intensely studied and commented upon in the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth century, a new mode of approach to this

¹⁵⁷ *Siyah Yišqaq*, pp. 29–30. For the image of the chain in one of the writings of R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov, another influential Mitnaggedic thinker whose ideas were very well known to Ḥaver, see *Derekh ha-Qodesh*, Jerusalem 1999, p. 100.

¹⁵⁸ See above, chapter 2, section 5.

¹⁵⁹ *Siyah Yišqaq*, p. 30. See also *ibidem*, p. 22.

classical text emerged: it was recited, not only studied, and in the cases of some major figures in Jewish culture, such R. Joseph Qaro and Ḥayyim Vital, it was turned into a technique for achieving a revelation derived from an entity called *Maggid, Shekhinah or Mishnah*.¹⁶⁰

It is obvious that the Mishnah was not recited solely for the sake of memorizing the canonical texts. The adepts were accomplished masters in interpretive literatures on this much more complex text, and Qaro contributed vast literary analyses which demonstrate his mastery of the content of the Mishnah. Thus, frequent recitations were not intended to refresh the memory of its content. Rather the recitations were closer to a sacramental praxis, though this type of explanation does not exhaust its aims. In a text found in the approbation of the Jerusalem rabbinate to the printing of Qaro's *Maggid Meisharim* it is said:

‘And the Lord was with Joseph, [namely Joseph Qaro] and he was a prosperous man’¹⁶¹ reading and studying the six orders of the Mishnah, so that the spirit of the Lord moved within him and he heard the voice speaking through the Mishnah itself [...] But thou, blessed of the Lord, hast helped me and comforted me by the melody of your voice with which you recite and study the Mishnah.¹⁶²

No doubt this technique may be described as a ‘short trigger’, as the revelation may take place after the recitation of two or five chapters; in other words, after relatively short recitation.¹⁶³ The close ties between technique and the identity of the power that is continuous with the technique is clear in many other instances in Qaro's book. What is striking is that the recited Mishnayyot have some form of ontological status, and the recitant may adhere to them.¹⁶⁴ However, the Mishnah speaks through the mouth of Qaro,¹⁶⁵ a feature discussed in more detail below.¹⁶⁶ In psychological terms we may assume there is a mechanism by which the oral activity overtakes the consciousness of the

¹⁶⁰ See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 18–19, 257–286; Lawrence Fine, ‘Recitation of Mishnah as a Vehicle for Mystical Inspiration: a Contemplative Technique Taught by Ḥayyim Vital’, *REJ* 116 (1982), pp. 183–199; Elior, ‘R. Joseph Karo’, pp. 678–680, 692–693.

¹⁶¹ Genesis 34:2.

¹⁶² Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 18–19, 109, 111, 267.

¹⁶³ *ibidem*, pp. 257–260.

¹⁶⁴ *ibidem*, pp. 159, 261.

¹⁶⁵ See e.g. the texts quoted *ibidem*, pp. 267–268, 276.

¹⁶⁶ See chapter 4, section 5.

recitant, possesses it, and communicates through it. The emphasis in several cases is not on mental absorption of the content but on recitation, thus giving human voice a special status, both as part of the technique and part of the process of revelation.

In the case of Qaro, this achievement was due less to magical recipes – divine names – than to highly nomian techniques – the recitation of the Mishnah. Naturally I do not assume that Qaro did not use magical recipes, but I assume that for the sake of attaining the revelation of the Maggid, he resorted mainly to repetition of the Mishnah. This use of the Mishnah as a technique may have something to do with the use made by R. Yehudah the Prince of the garment, according to *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, as seen above in chapter 2,6. As Werblowsky points out, this visionary apparition of a text which was studied previously by the same person is not new in Qaro but rather is found in a few earlier sources.¹⁶⁷

This last series of reifications of the recited text can be contrasted with the linguo-theosophies discussed above. In the case of identifications of supernal orders with linguistic entities a consonance and a resonance is created between the human and the divine planes. In *Sefer ha-Meshiv* and the various Safedian kabbalists' use of the Maggid the consonance is between human individual activity and its personification. The latter kabbalists were aware that their techniques participated to a much lesser degree in a collective enterprise, and they sought more personal types of contacts with an entity that was specific to them. These created entities are sometimes related to the divine realm, as it is the case of Qaro's Maggid which was also identified with the *Shekhinah*, although their common ontological status is that of a personalized mesocosm.

¹⁶⁷ Joseph Kero, pp. 275-277.

Chapter 4

Encountering God in Prayer

I say in full faith:
Prayers preceded God
Prayers created God
God created Man
Man creates Prayers
Which create God
Who creates Man

— Yehuda Amihai, *Patuah/Sagur/Patuah*

1. THE PRAYING GOD IN RABBINIC MATERIAL

Prayer is customarily thought to be verbal praise, thanks or requests addressed to a supernal being. People pray to angels, gods or God, angels pray to higher entities, and the entire cosmos can pray to the creator, as found in the well-known *Perek Shirah*.¹ Prayer can involve attitudes such as submission, dependence or humility. Brancuși's sculpture called Prayer, or Friedrich Heiler's book on prayer provide powerful illustrations of these main attitudes. Typically it is believed that much emotion needs to be invested to transform the recitation of words into prayer. The vertical relationship between the source of power and the suppliant means that the higher entity may listen to the request of the lower, but reserves its prerogative to heed it. A god is not supposed to pray, unless there is a higher, ultimate God to whom he may direct his supplications. In other words, in the typical understanding of how prayer works, there is an implicit assumption of a relationship to a god whose will is free, and who can respond to human words. Ideally, the divine will is complemented by some auditory apparatus to enable communication with the supernal divine; thus both an anthropomorphic vision of the deity, and a vision of language enable it to reach the human realm.²

¹ See Malachi Beit-Arie, *Perek Shira*, Introductions and Critical Edition Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1966 (Hebrew).

² For a phenomenological description of the more widespread forms of prayer, including some mystical aspects of this religious ritual, see Heiler, *Prayer*. Most of the

This type of relationship to God differs substantially from the phenomenological view of the Torah as bridging the gap between the human and the divine. In the case of the Torah, the leading image is that of an embodiment of the divine will in a permanent document. In the case of prayer, the situation is radically different. Although the issue is still how to bridge the gap, the web stretching across the gulf consists of texts expounded by humans, even when they were as authoritative as the ancient authors or members of the Great Assembly. Moreover, as Jewish mystics were certainly aware, the ancient texts of Jewish liturgy underwent significant changes over the centuries, through numerous additions and the creation of many variants. Thus, liturgical recitation lacks the image of textual perfection. The praying individual in Judaism, unlike the student of the Torah, is more dependent on divine will, because he is relying on a weaker vehicle. This will is enchainment within the Torah, its eternal representation, whereas it is totally free in the case of prayer.

This simple and rather traditional picture holds much less well when examining elite religious literatures. It applies more readily to popular forms of religion, even when cultivated by the elite, but is rarely found in elite literatures. There, more systematic and sometime dogmatic attitudes are prevalent, which consist of more complex and more so-called ‘sophisticated’ religious approaches. The divine will, so central to many forms of religions, becomes embedded in comprehensive and stable systems that attenuate and sometimes even obliterate its free exercise. Given this mitigation of the centrality of the divine will, in such cases prayer as described above becomes a more precarious enterprise, and clashes between earlier and later attitudes may emerge. Moreover, in some cases, as in Hesychasm, what was called prayer is in fact much closer to what I call a technique than a discipline.³

This chapter examines the prayer of God, and God as prayer. Sources can be found in theories dating back to late antiquity in rabbinic writings which were

points below dealing with prayer have no substantial parallels in Heiler’s book, whose descriptions of prayer, interesting as they are in themselves, are strongly colored by Neoplatonic and Western-Christian orientations.

³ See F. Couré, ‘Y a-t-il des techniques de prière?’ *Christus* 19 (1958), pp. 188-194; G. Wunderle, ‘La technique psychologique de l’hesychasme byzantin’, *La nuit mystique, Etudes carmelitaines*, 23,2 (1938), pp. 61-67. Compare however, to Heiler’s much less technical understanding of prayer, including the mystical form, in his *Prayer*, especially pp. 200-201. It should be noted that this author had quite a doctrinaire approach to religion, relegating the magical forms of prayer to a lower status. See *ibidem*, pp. 96-97, 350-351.

instrumental in establishing a similarity between man at prayer and God at prayer. This is a case of *imitatio dei* which is, in fact, an *imitatio fidei*, and also closes the gap between the two, producing a more integrated order. Although during the first stages of Jewish mysticism, the *Hekhalot* literature, the mystical features were less clear-cut, these debates culminated, as we shall see in the analyses of the later stages of Jewish mysticism, in sharp technical visions of prayer as a 'short trigger', and the mystical experiences related to it.

The first major description of God at prayer is found in the opening pages of the Babylonian Talmud. An important rabbinic figure, R. Yohanan, reports in the name of R. Yosei ben Zimra, the following question:

From where do we know that God says prayers? From the verse⁴ 'Even them will I bring to my Holy mountain, and I delighted them in the house of My prayer'. [In the verse] it is not written 'in the house of their prayer' but 'My prayer'. Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers. What does He pray? Mar Zutra' bar Tobias said in the name of Rav: 'Let it be that my [attribute of] mercy will suppress my [attribute of] anger, and my mercy will overflow my attributes [*middotai*] and I shall act regarding My sons by means of the attribute of mercy, and on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.'⁵

This appears to be a highly representative rabbinic depiction of the divine. Less characteristically rabbinic, however, is a passage which occurs immediately afterwards. R. Ishmael ben Elisha', acting as a High Priest, is asked by 'Akatriel YaH Seva'ot – presumably a name for God – to bless Him.⁶ This passage seems to be, as pointed out by Scholem, an addition stemming from the *Hekhalot* literature. In his blessing he uses the same formulas quoted above, but now they are addressed by a man to God:

Ishmael, My son, bless Me! I replied: 'May it be Thy will that Thy [attribute of] mercy suppress Thy [attribute of] anger, and Thy mercy overflow over Thy attributes, mayest thou deal with Thy children according to the attribute of mercy and mayest thou, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice'. And He nodded to me with His head.⁷

⁴ Psalms 56:7.

⁵ *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 7a. Here and below I consulted the translation by I. Epstein, *The Talmud, Seder Zer'a'im, Berakhot*, London 1948, vol. 1, p. 30.

⁶ For the history of the reception of this power see Abrams, 'From Divine Shape'.

⁷ *BT Berakhot*, fol. 7a. On this passage see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, pp. 51-55; Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, Albany 1993, pp. 10-11;

Here, the act of blessing is not only the formulation of a human wish, but comes closer to an actual step toward its fulfillment. By blessing God, R. Ishmael is capable of causing the overflow of the attribute of mercy, just as performance of the commandments augments the divine power according to other rabbinic statements.⁸ Since the setting for his encounter with the divine is explicitly connected to the offering of incense on the Day of Atonement, we may assume that this activation of mercy was part of the most sacred moment of Jewish ritual as performed by the High Priest.

The passages above assume the existence of a semi-independent zone of divine attributes whose dynamics depends upon the liturgical activities of both God and man in the form of prayer or blessing. The use of the same liturgical scheme is illustrative of a certain type of exchange: both God and man have the welfare of the children of Israel in mind. The human blessing is an exchange because it alters the relationship within the divine configuration. The overflow of attributes by the divine mercy it causes affects the divine attitude toward the children of Israel here below. The realm of divine attributes, alluded to in a highly implicit manner, is where the human blessing may become an ontic flow. More generally, the description of the overflow of the attribute of mercy over other attributes presumes a descent from a higher plane to another.

2. HASIDEI ASHKENAZ: IMAGINING AN ONTIC ZONE OF PRAYERS

Chapter 3 discussed esoteric traditions found in the writings of Hasidei Ashkenaz which have some parallels with early kabbalistic texts. In the texts of the Ashkenazi masters there is a pronounced proclivity toward hypostatic thinking. This tendency, not totally new in Judaism, developed in this type of literature at the same time as its initial steps in theosophical Kabbalah. As part of this tendency prayer was seen as a supernal hypostasis.⁹ Talmudic dialogue

Green, *Keter*, pp. 62-63, Yitzhak F. Baer, 'The Service of Sacrifice during the Second Temple', *Zion* 40 (1975), pp. 134-135 (Hebrew), Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, p. 57; Abrams, 'From Divine Shape'; Nathaniel Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate, Angelic Vice-Regency in Late Antiquity*, Leiden 1999, pp. 58-59.

⁸ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 157-160; Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, pp. 52-65; Garb, 'Power and *Kavvanah*', pp. 36-61.

⁹ On prayer in this type of esoteric literature see Dan, *On Sanctity*, pp. 370-381, where all the references to his prior studies on the topic are found; Abrams, "Sod kol ha-Sodot"; idem, 'The Boundaries', idem, 'The Shekhinah'; idem 'From the Divine Shape', pp. 52-55.

such as the one above became more elaborate in some forms of medieval Jewish literature, and took on a radical hypostatic turn. In an Ashkenazi passage by an unknown author we read:

‘When Israel blesses God, then the Glory becomes greater and ascends higher and higher,¹⁰ [...] as [it is written]:¹¹ ‘Cause the Lord to ascend’. Who can cause [the Lord] to ascend? The Glory, that ascends according to the blessing and the praise. Therefore it is said, ‘and thy pious ones shall bless thee’, and thereafter ‘they shall speak of the glory of Thy kingdom and speak of Thy power’ [...] When they bless Him, He becomes greater and larger... because of the blessings and praises that Israel praise Him, like a man whose heart swells when he is praised’.¹²

Here there is a clear example of prayer as an exchange: man gives something to God, who himself is enhanced by this offering. Unlike other Ashkenazi texts, which are sometimes less explicit on theurgy this is one of the most obvious cases of a theurgical interpretation of liturgy. In another anonymous Ashkenazi text we find the following passage:

‘The prayer of Israel [...] sits on the Head of the Holy, Blessed be He, and becomes a diadem [‘Aṭarah] for Him, as it is said¹³: ‘He that dwells in the secret place of the most High’. ‘In the secret’¹⁴ as the prayer rests like a diadem

¹⁰ Compare R. Menahem Recanati’s view, in his *Commentary on the Torah*, fols. 71d-72a, that the Glory ascends towards the Tetragrammaton. Recanati’s discussion is even more crucial, ibidem, fol. 43c, in which ‘the supernal Glory’ is presented as longing to ascend to the supernal light, in the context of interpreting the recitation of ‘Aleinu le-shabeah. Interestingly enough, on the same page R. Eleazar of Worms is quoted twice, as is also R. Yehudah he-Hasid. The Ashkenazic presentation of the Glory is an issue of great importance, as it may evidence a dynamism of the Glory preceding the kabbalistic dynamics of the *sefirot*, which served as one of the starting points for the intradivine kabbalistic processes.

¹¹ Psalms 99:5.

¹² *Commentary on ha-’Aderet ve-ha-’Emunah*, printed in *The Siddur* of R. Naftali Hertz Treves, Thiengen 1560, col. BH, fol. 2,b. On the relationship between R. Eleazar’s *Commentary on the Prayerbook* and this commentary see Joseph Dan, ‘Commentaries on ha-’Aderet ve-ha-’Emunah Authored by Ashkenazi Hasidim’, *Tarbiz* 50 (1981), pp. 396-404 (Hebrew).

¹³ Psalms 91:1.

¹⁴ *ba-seter* has the same numerical value as ’Akatriel, namely 662. On ’Akatriel as the secret name of the Divine crown – *Keter*, see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 54.

'Atarah, as it is written, ‘and it is a Crown on the head of ’Akatriel¹⁵ Lord God of Israel’.¹⁶

This position, which follows and elaborates much earlier views found in late Midrashic texts¹⁷ deals with the highest status that prayer conceived of as a hypostatic entity can reach within the divine realm in this system of thought – it crowns the head of God. One of the major passages which exemplifies the process of hypostatization, and which has been discussed by several scholars in different contexts, paints a richer picture:

‘The place of the *’Atarah* [diadem] is on the head of the Creator, in [or by the means of] the [divine] name of 42 letters¹⁸ [...] and when the *’Atarah* is on the head of the Creator, then the *’Atarah* is called *Akatriel* [...] Of it David said:¹⁹ ‘He that dwells in the secret [place] of the most High, shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty’ – that is: ‘in [or by the means of] the prayer of the Almighty we shall abide’ [...] since the prayer is *šelota*’ to God,²⁰ and it sits on the left side of God,²¹ like a bride and [her] bridegroom. And it is called *bat melekh* [the daughter of the King], and sometimes it is called, *bat qol*, after the name of its mission. Of it Solomon said:²² ‘and *eHYeH – Shekhinah – eSLW* and the name of the *Shekhinah* is *eHYeH*, and the [Aramaic] translation of *eTzLW* is *TRBYH*,²³ derived from *BRTYH*²⁴ since it is called daughter of the King, for the

¹⁵ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 363, note 57.

¹⁶ Ms. New York JTS 1786, fol. 43b. For another explicit identification of prayer and *’Atarah* see R. Eleazar of Worms’ *Commentary on Song of Songs*, printed in *Perush ha-Roqeah al ha-Meggilot*, ed. Yoel Klugmann, Benei Beraq 1984, p. 127 on 3:11.

¹⁷ See Green, *Keter*, pp. 33–41; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 191–192.

¹⁸ On this divine name see Lawrence H. Schiffman, ‘A Forty-two Letter Divine Name in the Aramaic Magic Bowls’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1973), pp. 97–102; see also the text by R. Eleazar printed in Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, p. 124. The proto-kabbalistic passage was, apparently, part of a commentary on this name, attributed to R. Hai Gaon.

¹⁹ Psalms 91:1.

²⁰ *Šelota’ le-QBH*.

²¹ In a treatise by R. Eleazar, *Hilkhot Tefillah*, he indicates that the *’Atarah* is tantamount to the divine phylacteries; see Ms. New York JTSA 1885, fol. 19b. Phylacteries are donned on both the head and the left hand. See the explicit nexus between *Keter* and phylacteries of head in the same text, reproduced in Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, pp. 121–122.

²² Probably a reference to Proverbs 8:30.

²³ On the problem connected to this translation, see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 185 note 213.

name of the *Shekhinah* [means] that she is with Him – 'eTzLW – in this house [...] He has a *šelot*²⁵ named 'eTzLW, that is the tenth Kingship²⁶.²⁷

This passage describes the same relationships between *Keter*, 'Atarah, 'Akatriel, and the motif of secrecy as in the first passage.²⁸ Here the dynamic ascent of the 'Atarah and its transformation into a Crown – *Keter* – is also highly apparent. However, this text also deals with three different transformations of prayer in the supernal world:²⁹ first, it stands at least implicitly for prayer as the spouse of God, referring to a vision of the spouse as the diadem of her husband.³⁰ The second feminine manifestation defines the 'prayer of God' as His bride, and this description is quite explicit. The third transformation of prayer is designated by the term *Shekhinah*, called the daughter of God. Thus, prayer takes on three feminine forms, starting with the youngest, the daughter, then the bride, and finally the spouse, who presumably is older. In other words, prayer goes through an aging process while ascending. In Ashkenazi Hasidism there is a concept which describes the ascending prayer as expanding.³¹ Here the

²⁴ i.e. 'His daughter' in Aramaic.

²⁵ This together with the mentioning of 'Akatriel, seems to be an indication of the impact of the passage from *Berakhot*, analyzed above.

²⁶ Or, perhaps, 'the tenth, which is also Kingship', viewing ten and kingship as two independent epithets for the last sefirah. See also the phrase *Malkhut ha-'Assiriyyot*, Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, p. 122.

²⁷ Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1822, fols. 60b-61a; Cf. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 184-185; Dan, ibidem, pp. 118-129; idem, 'The Emergence of Mystical Prayer', *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, eds. J. Dan and F. Talmage, Cambridge, Mass. 1982, pp. 112-115; Asi Farber-Ginat, 'The Concept of the Merkabah in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Esotericism – *Sod Ha-'Egoz* and its Development', Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 236-238 (Hebrew); Green, *Keter*, pp. 94-96, 125-130; Wolfson, *Along the Path*, pp. 40-43; idem, 'Images of God's Feet', *People of the Body, Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, Albany 1992, pp. 158-160; Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, p. 195.

²⁸ Compare also the motif of God's residence in a place named *setarim*, secrecy, cf. *BT Hagigah* fol. 5b, which is attributed to the *Shekhinah* in the *Alphabet of R. Aqivah, Batei Midrashot*, eds. Shlomo Aharon and Abraham Wertheimer, Jerusalem 1955, II, pp. 360, 428.

²⁹ More on this issue see Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, chapter 1.

³⁰ Proverbs 12:4.

³¹ See the first quote in this paragraph, Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 160-161; Wolfson, *Along the Path*, pp. 170-171 note 307; Green, *Keter*, p. 122; R. Eleazar of Worms, *Commentary on Prayerbook*, I, pp. 148-149.

Shekhinah is understood as being an emanated entity, and the term *ne'ešelet* occurs explicitly in the text.³² These two feminine expansions may represent a permutation: the human reaches the divine while the divine reaches the lowest stage in the divine realm through prayer, the daughter, and has a mission, presumably in the lower world. Thus, an ontic zone of prayer emerges in which both God and man take part and perhaps even cooperate.

A hypostatic understanding of prayer is implicit in certain writings of R. Eleazar of Worms. He describes the illumination of prayer, when the people of Israel perform the divine will, and in another case the angel Sandalphon is described as clothing the prayer with a radiant fire as part of its preparation for the ascent on high.³³ These hypostatic interpretations may be an offshoot of earlier theory concerning the praying God from the Heikhalot passage, as found in the Talmudic discussion above and the fact that the name 'Akatriel occurs in two of these texts. The existence of a zone of prayer indicates that there is a substantial resemblance between the human ascending ritual and the divine descending one, which meet in the same zone. The hypostatic view suggests there is a permanent supernal extension which can be met by human prayer. Unlike the continuous cords descending from above which we discussed earlier, here there is an intersection of acts of prayer working in different directions but operating and coexisting within the same zone. An issue that cannot be treated here is the reverberation of this theory in Zoharic thought, for example the lengthy discussions describing the ascent of prayer on high.³⁴

3. GERONESE KABBALAH, THE CIRCLE OF SPECULATION, HASIDISM

The praying God of the rabbinic texts prompted much speculation, elaboration and interpretation in kabbalistic and Polish Hasidic literatures as well. In early Kabbalah, a theosophical interpretation was put forward. According to R. Azriel of Gerona, prayer within the divine realm consists of the activity of a lower *sefirah* in relationship to a higher one:

'Each one is in awe of the superior one, and this is the reason why it has been said³⁵ 'The Holy One, blessed be He, says prayer'. And this is [the prayer]:³⁶ 'A

³² See Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, p. 121.

³³ See *Commentary on Prayerbook*, pp. 414, 440. More on radiance in R. Eleazar see above chapter 3, section 2.

³⁴ See II, fol. 202a.

³⁵ *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 7a.

God feared in the great council of the holy ones, and revered by all those around about him'. And He also says:³⁷ 'and He prayed continually for Himself and he said:³⁸ 'Do not be silent, O God, do not hold the peace, and be still, O God' and it is said:³⁹ 'Give Him no rest'.⁴⁰

Interestingly enough, the content of divine prayer here differs from the Talmudic source discussed above. It interprets the passage on the basis of a view found in the *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah* by R. Isaac Sagi Nahor, one of the main sources of R. Azriel's thought. The Provençal master says that:

The contemplation⁴¹ is that each and every cause is derived from the cause which is superior to it, because a measure⁴² is drawn from the measure which is carved, and the carved one [draws] from the engraved, and the engraved from the inscribed, and the inscribed from the occult.⁴³

The prayer of the lower *sefirah* consists, presumably, of an ascent to the higher one to draw its sustenance from it. The Provençal kabbalist merges the Neo-Platonic terminology of cause with the rabbinic vision of divine measure, making a synthesis of archaic and philosophical points of view – the impersonal 'cause' prays. Elsewhere R. Isaac Sagi-Nahor states that the drawing is described as sucking, *yeniqqah*, again a archaic-philosophical synthesis similar to the previous one. This helps explain R. Ezra's opinion that:

The goal of their will and intention is to cleave and ascend to the place of their sucking, and therefore our sages established the blessing, the *Qedushah* and the

³⁶ Psalm 89:8.

³⁷ Psalm 72:15. I translate the text in the manner in which the kabbalist understood it.

³⁸ ibidem, 83:2.

³⁹ Isaiah 62:7.

⁴⁰ *Commentary on 'Aggadot*, p. 8. For a simpler formulation see his contemporary R. Jacob ben Sheshet, *Meshev Devarim Nekholim*, p. 171.

⁴¹ *ha-Sefiyyah*.

⁴² *Middah*. This term reflects a borrowing from the Talmudic passage discussed above, adapted to the sefirotic structure.

⁴³ *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, ed. G. Scholem, appendix to his lecture on *The Kabbalah in Provence*, ed. R. Schatz, Jerusalem 1963, p. 5; See also R. Ezra of Gerona, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, p. 504; Gottlieb, *The Kabbalah*, pp. 196-197.

union, to [bring about] the emanation and to draw the ‘source of life’ to the other *sefirot* – [namely,] the ‘fathers’ – to sustain their ‘sons’ after them.⁴⁴

Elsewhere in the same book we read that:

The spiritual entities ascend and are drawn toward the place of their sucking; as it is said:⁴⁵ ‘Because of the evil to come, the righteous⁴⁶ is taken away’. And for this reason we should endeavor to cause the emanation and the blessing to descend upon the ‘fathers’, that the ‘sons’ may receive the influx.⁴⁷

In these sources, which are highly representative of the early stages of Kabbalah, especially the *Book Bahir*, the supernal world is described in archaic terms: ‘sons’ and ‘fathers’, and ‘sucking’. However, from our perspective, what is important to emphasize is the occurrence of the term ‘blessing’. This is clearly a linguistic event, which is interpreted as pointing to the process of emanation. These texts can thus be viewed as an emphatically interactive form of linguo-theosophy.

The purpose of prayer mentioned by R. Ezra is to counteract the upward movement of the *sefirot* toward their primordial source by the act of drawing down emanation onto the higher and lower *sefirot* through the ritual. Interestingly enough, the above principle formulated in the context of lower *sefirot* praying to higher *sefirot*, was reformulated in later Kabbalah through the term ‘*amirah*, logos, or utterance. R. David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid, a late thirteenth century kabbalist, wrote that:

Each ‘*amirah* thanks and bows down to the ‘*amirah* higher than it, since each is integrated into another.⁴⁸

This kabbalist attempted to recapture the linguistic nature of the divine attributes that pray. A clear case of linguo-theosophy, this brief passage adopts and adapts the rabbinic notion of *ma’amarot*, the ten creative utterances of God in Genesis. R. Azriel’s passage was quoted by the early fourteenth century

⁴⁴ *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, p. 486. See also the interesting interpretation of the rabbinic statement found in R. Todros ha-Levi Abulafia, *Oṣar ha-Kavod*, fol. 4d, where prayer is explicitly interpreted as the search of the *sefirot* for influx.

⁴⁵ Isaiah 57:1.

⁴⁶ I assume that the ‘righteous’ man stands for each of the seven lower *sefirot*, as associated with the idea of ‘cedar’; cf. Psalms 92:13: ‘The righteous man flourishes like the palm tree, he grows like a cedar in Lebanon’.

⁴⁷ *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Chavel, *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, vol. 2, p. 504.

⁴⁸ *Mare’ot ha-Sou’ot*, p. 196. See also *ibidem*, p. 73.

Italian kabbalist R. Menahem Recanati in an interesting context:

The superior [sefira] is the soul of the lower one, and as the sages of Kabbalah said: 'Each one is in awe of the superior one, and prays to it.'⁴⁹

Here, prayer is not only an expression of dependence of the lower divine power on a higher one, but demonstrates a more organic affinity since the higher is said to be the soul of the lower. In fact, this organic relationship between the divine powers casts the entire system as a series of interconnected powers, but also shows it as uninterrupted activity consisting of one continuous prayer. In a later passage, the process of prayer is described as the desire and the longing of one sefira for another.⁵⁰

Another example of a theosophical interpretation of the Talmudic dispute on the praying God is found in a fourteenth century Spanish kabbalist, R. Nehemya' Yosha'a ben Shmuel, who describes prayer as an emanation that descends. He interprets the Aramaic *šelot* as indicative of emanation, '*asıylut*'.⁵¹ This descending vision may have been inspired by the Talmudic passage where mercy descends, and is paralleled in one of the passages discussed below. The processes described in these passages are doubtless related to the Talmudic passage in *Berakhot*; they attempt to make sense of a mythical view which was, for more philosophically inclined kabbalists, fairly opaque. Some may have resorted to a Plotinian vision of the ascent and contemplation of each entity of the higher one, and its integration of the energy that enables its activity below.⁵² In the standard symbolism of a theosophical kabbalist, the term prayer customarily refers to the lowest sefira: *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, in a manner reminiscent of the text referred to in R. Eleazar of Worms's *Sefer ha-Hokhma* and discussed above. A long list of such sources can be compiled but only a few references are provided here.⁵³ Other theosophical kabbalists identified prayer with the sefira of *Tiferet*,⁵⁴ and even more rarely with the sefira of *Keter*.⁵⁵ It

⁴⁹ Commentary on Prayer, Ms. New York, JTS 1887, fol. 139a. See also the anonymous *Sefer ha-Ne'elam*, Ms. Paris BN 817, fol. 72a and R. Elijah of Genazzano, translated in Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, pp. 294–295.

⁵⁰ Cf. R. Moses of Kiev, *Shushan Sodot*, Koretz 1784, fol. 52b.

⁵¹ See *Migdal Yeshu'ot*, ed. Raphael Cohen, Jerusalem 1998, p. 31 (Hebrew).

⁵² See *Enneads* III:8.

⁵³ See R. Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Šedeq*, fol. 7b, *Sefer ha-Qanah*, fol. 18ab; R. Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 33, ch. 22; II, fol. 45a. See also note 74 below.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohit*, fol. 65a.

is difficult to evaluate the contribution of these hypostatic visions which equated prayer to divine attributes as regards the mystical union of a person praying to these divine hypostases. In any case, in theosophical Kabbalah a false etymology was applied to the term *tefillah*: it was interpreted in some sources as meaning 'cleaving' or 'adherence' by erroneously deriving the noun from the term *petil*, thread or cord.⁵⁵

However, to the best of my knowledge, none of the classical kabbalistic writings identified *tefillah* with God in a straightforward manner. Apparently the first explicit identification of God with prayer in Judaism is found in a treatise belonging to a special group of kabbalistic writings designated by scholars as the 'Circle of the Book of Speculation'.⁵⁷ This is an extremely enigmatic series of writings whose historical background and conceptual system still need detailed investigation, and this obscurity creates problems for a clear understanding of the following short passages. An anonymous kabbalist, presumably living in the second half of the thirteenth century, wrote:

The Holy One, blessed be He, is called *tefillah*, and *Keter 'Elyon* is called *berakhah* [...] *tefillah* stems from *nefilah* [...] Know that the Holy One, blessed be He, is called *tefillah*, because He is the root and the essence of all, and from Him the blessing falls like emanation⁵⁸ and from one blessing to another, until the end of all the *sefirot*. But the prayer we pray every day is an issue of loftiness,⁵⁹ and Root and Splendor and Glory and Greatness and Kingship. And we look to the Faith⁶⁰ which is rooted in the zone of the Thought⁶¹ [...] and this

⁵⁵ See R. Todros Abulafia, *'Oşar ha-Kavod*, fol. 5bc.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., R. Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'Orah*, I, p. 76; R. Bahia ben Asher, on Deuteronomy 6, ed. Chavel, p. 276 and Gottlieb, *The Kabbalah*, p. 254; the short treatise called 'Twenty-Four Secrets' plausibly authored by the early 14th century R. Joseph Angelet, Ms. Jerusalem, JNUL 1959, fols. 213b-214a; R. Reuven Şarfati, *Commentary on Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohot*, Mantua 1558, fol. 65a; R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *Tola'at Ya'aqov*, Jerusalem 1967, fol. 4a, R. Isaac 'Ezovi, *'Aggudat 'Ezov*, p.22; R. Elimelekh of Lisansk, *No'am Elimelekh*, fol. 39b, R. Aharon ha-Levi of Staroscele, *Sefer Sha'arei ha-Yihud ve-ha-'Emunah*, Jerusalem 1966, fol. 158b and in numerous places in R. Nahman of Bratzlav's writings. Such a view can also be found among Jewish philosophers. See Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, pp. 207-208.

⁵⁷ On this circle see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 309-364; Markerman, *The Book of Contemplation, Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources*, Albany 1992.

⁵⁸ *be-derekh 'asilut*.

⁵⁹ *gavehut*.

⁶⁰ *'emunah*.

⁶¹ *mehisat ha-mashavah*.

is the reason why the masters of the *merkavah* said the Holy One, blessed be He, is not called *tefillah* but because He is full of eyes,⁶² from within and from without, namely in the inner aspect of Thought, and in the zone of Thought that is external to the intellect [...] And it is not in vain that it is said in the verse⁶³ ‘And I am a prayer to you, YHWH, time of goodwill’ [...] and there are angels [...] one which corresponds to the Holy One, blessed be He, is called *tefillah*, and the other called *berakhah* which corresponds to *Keter*.⁶⁴

The passage is based on the assumption that there are two movements: one downward starting from the divinity, and the other upward, starting from man. The former is based on a false etymology of the noun *tefillah*, that derives it from the root *NPL*, to fall.⁶⁵ God’s blessing descends from the highest plane downwards. If God prays, He does so in a downward direction, by blessing the sefirotic realm, by emanating a flow that reaches the last divine power, or *sefirah*. In other words, the process of intra-divine emanation is tantamount to prayer. However, in addition, there is an extra-divine power, an angel called *tefillah*, because it corresponds to God. Thus, prayer is not only an epithet for the divine but is indicative of an emanative process which expands the lower and then the divine realm. Identification of a chain may be problematic here, although clearly the liturgy suggests a movement of the divine toward man, just as man’s prayer is thought to reach the highest point in the divine realm.

The upward human movement has to do with height, or elevation, *gavehut*, by which the human act reaches a very high point within the divine sphere. However, after reaching this high point within the divine pleroma, a downward movement apparently takes place: the prayer must let its faith fall:

We are causing our Faith⁶⁶ to fall⁶⁷ in a place which is a Pure, Living Substance, ‘Amen’, ‘Omen’, ‘Emunah’,⁶⁸ from which Faith is emanated, in the manner of emanation, which is *Keter*.⁶⁹

⁶² On the supernal entities as full of eyes see Raffaele Pettazzoni, ‘Corpul presarat cu ochi’, *Zalmoxis*, New edition, vol. I, 2000, pp. 61-68.

⁶³ Psalm 69:14. I translate the verse in the manner in which the kabbalist understood it.

⁶⁴ *Sod vi-Yesod ha-Qadmoni*, Ms. Jerusalem JNUL 1959, fols. 198b-199a; Ms. Vatican-Urbino 31, fols. 170b-171a; Ms. London, British Library 777, fol. 185a. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 324.

⁶⁵ See *Tanhuma*, III, *va-Ethan*, fol. 102a.

⁶⁶ ‘Emunateinu.

⁶⁷ *Meppilin*.

The first *sefirah*, *Keter*, is thus called Faith. A similar projection of Faith on high, and its identification as a divinity is also found in Hinduism.⁷⁰ Whereas God's blessing reaches the lowest of the *sefirot*, human prayer and faith reach the first *sefirah*, *Keter*. Does the ascent of the human prayer trigger the divine prayer; i.e., the descent of the blessing? The question is a difficult one but there is a certain similarity between this position and the passage on the *selota'* in the previous paragraph. In both cases there is an interchange of man and God through the concept of prayer, and the emergence of a zone of prayer in the supernal world. The anonymous kabbalist claims that the identification of the divinity by prayer is not his invention but follows a position found in the much earlier Jewish mystical *Merkavah* literature. In this case, as in others found in the Circle of the Book of Speculation the attribution may be spurious. However, it would be worth comparing the above passage to a view expressed by the seventh century Syrian monk Martyrius Sahdona, who writes in his *Book of Perfection* that: 'Prayer is omnipotent like God. It commands on earth and has a hold in heaven. Prayer is a god amongst human beings'.⁷¹ Although the Syrian author does not seem to adhere to hypostatic vision of prayer, but rather to its omnipotent capacities reminiscent of the divine powers, this is still a rare statement. These identifications of prayer and God may perhaps reflect a certain historical affinity, or a similarity that draws on common sources, with the rabbinic discussion of the praying God.

This hypostatic, kabbalistic view of prayer might have remained mere speculation if it had not been copied almost verbatim in a classic of kabbalistic literature, the late fourteenth century Byzantine compendium of various kabbalistic passages and treatises known as *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*.⁷² The anonymous

⁶⁸ This triad also occurs elsewhere in the context of prayer in R. Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on 'Aggadot*, pp. 20, 23-25; and in a *miscelanea* of kabbalistic traditions close to his thought found in Ms. Oxford, Christ Church 198, fol. 24a; R. Menahem Recanati, *Commentary on Prayer*, Ms. New York JTSA 1887, fol. 153; R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1630, fol. 87b. R. Azriel is close, as pointed out already by Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 326 to the thought of the Speculation-circle.

⁶⁹ *ibidem*.

⁷⁰ See Charles Malamoud, 'La déesse Croyance', ed. L. Girard, *Cahiers pour un Temps, Michel de Certeau*, Centre G. Pompidou, Paris, pp. 225-236.

⁷¹ ed. A. de Halleux, *Livre de la Perfection*, II:8 40; CSCO 253, Syri 111, pp. 32-34; Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Cisterian Publications 101, Michigan 1987, pp. 218-219.

⁷² Premislany 1883, II, fol. 71ab.

author of this book made only minor changes in the passages quoted above. This book, which exists in many manuscripts and has been in print since 1784 in Koretz, helped disseminate the equating of God and prayer to larger audiences. A theory was derived from it by two leading Hasidic figures: R. Pinhas of Koretz, one of the most important followers of the Besht and, later on, the great-grandson of the Besht, the famous R. Nahman of Bratzlav. R. Pinhas testifies that he heard the following theory from the Besht himself:

I also heard from him about prayer, that he said: people think that they pray in front of the Holy One, blessed be He. But this is not so, because indeed prayer is the [very] essence of divinity, as it is said⁷³: 'He is thy praise, and He is thy God'. 'Prayer' is [likewise] one of the cognomens of *Malkhut*^{74,75}

The Besht identified the term 'praise' in the biblical verse with God. R. Pinhas' argues that the customary meaning of prayer in front of God is a misconception since the very process of prayer is tantamount to the divine. Though this position may well be an exegetical development, the impact of the passage from *Sefer ha-Peliyah* is more than likely. In very similar terms we read in R. Nahman of Bratzlav:

The enthusiasm⁷⁶ that man is filled with while he prays is the aspect of God, Blessed be He, Himself, as though this is the aspect of 'He is thy praise, and He is thy God'⁷⁷ because He, blessed be He, is Himself the praise and the prayer⁷⁸

⁷³ Deuteronomy 10:21.

⁷⁴ On this issue see above, note 53. For another formulation of the identity of prayer with the divine presence by the Besht see R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Safnat Pa'anéah*, fol. 2c. I see no compelling reason to accept Elior's conjecture that this view was adopted by Hasidic thinkers from R. Joseph Qaro. I am not aware of such an identification in Qaro. See Elior, 'R. Joseph Karo', p. 693 but the many sources mentioned in note 53 above suffice to suggest the existence of much more plausible alternatives.

⁷⁵ 'Imrei Pinhas, Ramat Gan 1988, p. 83, §64. On this text see Ron P. Margolin, 'The Interiorization of Religious Life and Thought at the Beginning of Hasidism: Its Sources and Epistemological Basis', Ph.D. Thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1999, p. 261 (Hebrew). For the assessment that the divine is found in the very fabric of invocation see Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p. 111. For the relationship between the Worshipped who becomes the worshipper in Sufism see Henri Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, Princeton 1998, pp. 126-127. See also the view that the divine was attracted into the human medium in ancient theurgy, cf. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 295-296.

⁷⁶ *Hitlahavut*. See the Hasidic sources collected and discussed by Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, pp. 94-97. On the importance of enthusiasm in Neoplatonic theurgy see Shaw, ibidem, pp. 81, 92, 232; Dodds, ibidem, p. 73.

As we shall see below, the praying *Shekhinah* is found in a passage in a collection of traditions from the circle of the Great Maggid of Medzherich. Hasidism differs from the rabbinic, Ḥasidei Ashkenaz and many kabbalistic literatures as quoted above by the disappearance of the median zone of prayer. For the eighteenth century Hasidic masters, the direct relationship with the ultimate divine realm did not involve significant modes of mediation. Because of their immanentist assumptions, their Neo-Platonic understanding of the possibility to cleave directly to the divine, or the belief that they could draw the divine into their ritual utterances, prayer was not a dynamic power interchanged between man and God, but the embodiment of God Himself. In general however for most kabbalists, God tended to be identified with the Torah. In the case of Hasidic literature, which gravitates much more around a mysticism of prayer, God too was envisaged as prayer. The technique, the experience and the spiritual entity encountered in this experience are one, similar to the triune version of God, Torah and Israel. Nevertheless, I am not aware of a crystallization of these relations in a triune formula as found in thousands of instances in the case of the Torah.

4. TALISMATIC PRAYER AND CORD-LIKE ONTOLOGY

Most of the texts above deal with the ontic zone created by human and divine acts of prayer. The precise status of this zone is not well described, and this vagueness has to do with the nature of most of the sources analyzed above. With the exception of theosophical Kabbalah, the passages quoted here dealing with the zone of prayer from medieval and the pre-modern Hasidic literatures were not concerned with theological and metaphysical elaborations. Neither were they written by analytical philosophers, or scholastic masters. Their purpose was to provide a rationale for ritual rather than construct a detailed metaphysics and it is unlikely that any of them worked with one single metaphysical structure in mind. What is presupposed is an emanative field into which human activity ascends and comes as close as possible to the divine realm, which is mapped in ritualistic terms.

⁷⁷ Deuteronomy 10:21.

⁷⁸ *Sihot ha-Ran*, §52, p. 37. See Tzvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness in the work of R. Nahman of Bratslav*, Tel Aviv 2003 Hebrew. For a later reverberation of the view that it is the 'divine power' that is really praying see R. Jacob Ševi Yalish, 'Emmet le-Ya'aqov, Lemberg 1884, fol. 4d.

However, a totally different theory emerged in the late medieval period, one which is crucially important for the history of mysticism of prayer and the concept of a nexus between the nature of technique and that of experience. In this new view, prayer is a technique that causes the divine power to descend into the human zone and precedes the ascent of human energy forged by the utterance of prayer to the divine zone. The kabbalistic and Hasidic views of prayer differ in that the descent, which can also occur while studying the Torah, is mustered to enable human prayer, and is coupled primarily with an appeal or request to ascend on high. This theory stems, ultimately, from astro-magical sources, some of whose articulations were discussed in the previous two chapters.⁷⁹ When couched in the form that became classical in the writings of R. Moses Cordovero, it combined spiritual developments which took place in ecstatic Kabbalah and talismanic understandings of this lore.

The earlier kabbalistic source for the nexus between *kavvanah* and combinations of letters is probably an anonymous *Commentary on Liturgy*, from the circle of Abraham Abulafia, or the circle where his Kabbalah emerged. This influential work has not received the attention it deserves in scholarship.⁸⁰ It is noteworthy that the earliest occurrences of the phrase *mahashavot zarot* is found in *Sha'arei Sedeq*, written by R. Nathan of Sa'adyah, Abulafia's student. According to R. Nathan, one of the preconditions for perfect performance of the Abulafian technique of permutation of letters is the annihilation of 'alien thoughts' a view found as well in Abraham Abulafia's *'Or ha-Sekhel*, a treatise dedicated to the same R. Nathan, and in other Abulafian treatises where purification of thought is mentioned.⁸¹ Therefore, most of the earliest appearances of the term 'alien thoughts', well-known in later contexts dealing with prayer, are explicitly connected to Abulafia's mystical technique.

Cordovero combined the traditions regarding prayer, or quasi-liturgical situations to the theory of the drawing down of supernal sources in a way that transcends the syntheses of earlier kabbalists. He was acquainted with Abulafia's passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel* which he copied verbatim in *Pardes*

⁷⁹ See chapter 2, section 2; chapter 3, section 5.

⁸⁰ See Ms. Paris BN 848, fol. 23b. On this treatise see Moshe Idel, 'Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah', *Journal of the Warburg and the Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988), pp. 170–174; Adam Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers in Early Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Study and Critical Edition of an Anonymous Commentary to the Prayers*, Los Angeles 2004 (Hebrew).

⁸¹ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 40.

Rimmonim.⁸² Cordovero combined it with talismanic beliefs and over the course of time his disciples drew on his inspiration and integrated this synthesis into the ‘cord’ theory. An interesting example of the linkage between prayer and the ‘cord’ view in a passage was seen above in a quote from R. Elijah de Vidas.⁸³ Cordovero’s writings also served as a starting point for the synthesis of another influential disciple of his, R. Abraham Azulai. The emergence of a synthesis between this view of prayer and the cord and chains in their writings strongly suggests that the common source was Moses Cordovero. However, this theory is found in its most explicit form in his followers, hinting at a yet unidentified text by their master which served as their common source. Some of the most influential passages on this topic, which are quintessential for an understanding of the emergence of the theories of prayer not only in Kabbalah but also in early Hasidism are found in R. Moses Cordovero’s classic compendium of Kabbalah, *Pardes Rimmonim*:

From it,⁸⁴ the vapor of his mouth, appears a spiritual force and entity, which is as like an angel that will ascend and will be bound with its source, and will hasten to produce its operation, in a speedy and rapid manner, and this is the secret of the pronunciation of [Divine] Names and the *kavvanah* of prayer.⁸⁵

The ‘pronunciation of names’ is obviously a reference to Abulafia’s type of Kabbalah, as we have seen in detail in Chapter 2. The affinity between Abulafia’s technique and his circle and Cordovero’s *kavvanah* of prayer is twofold. Both constitute, according to Cordovero, methods to draw spiritual forces downward. The pronunciation of names is described by Abulafia, in *’Or ha-Sekhel* in terms reflecting the accoutrements of prayer, including the basically optional use of *talit* and *tefillin*, and the purging of alien thoughts, etc.⁸⁶ The Cordoverian nexus between combinations of letters and *kavvanah* occurs in R. Abraham Azulai’s very influential *Hesed le-’Avraham*,⁸⁷ which was

⁸² See Gate 21, ch. 1; I, fol. 97ab, where it is cited in the name of *Sefer ha-Niqqud*, a mistake which can be easily explained.

⁸³ See chapter 1, section 3.

⁸⁴ i.e., the utterance of a word.

⁸⁵ *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 27, ch. 2; II, fol. 59d. See more above chapter 1 sections 3 and 6, about the linguistic continuum in Cordovero and da Vidas.

⁸⁶ For more on this issue see Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 113–117.

⁸⁷ fol. 10a.

a key text for the early Hasidic masters.⁸⁸ Elsewhere, in the last gate of *Pardes Rimmonim*, which also constitutes the culmination of his mystical path, Cordovero defines the essence of *kavvanah* as follows:

A prayer using *kavvanah* must draw the spiritual force from the supernal levels downwards onto the letters he is pronouncing so as to be able to elevate these letters to that supernal level, in order to hasten his request.⁸⁹

Cordovero explains in another passage:

When someone pronounces and causes one of the letters [namely sounds] to move, [then] the spiritual force of that [letter] will necessarily be stirred, and the vapor[s] of [his] mouth, out of which holy forms are formed, will ascend and be bound with their root, for they are [!] the root of the emanation [i.e., the ten sefirot].⁹⁰

In other words, the ascent of the sounds of prayer are meant to cause the prayer to cleave to God, similar to the way described by some Hasidic masters later on.⁹¹ The mechanical nature and immediate effect of prayer are worth stressing: the mere recitation of words because of the spiritual aspect found in them, automatically triggers the ascent of the letters to the source, which implies that it does not involve special mental operations. Even more important for the history of the kabbalistic intention of prayer is an additional passage in the same book by Cordovero, which had many reverberations in writings of his disciples and even among Lurianic kabbalists.⁹² One version, found in a passage by R. Abraham Azulai, is as follows:

⁸⁸ On the ‘combinations of letters and prayer’ see the passage by R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, below, R. Abraham ha-Malakh, *Hesed le-Avraham*, Jerusalem ND, fol. 12cd, one of his statements is quoted in Idel, Hasidism, p. 57 and compare to a passage by R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, printed in Yehoshu'a Mondschein, *Kerem Habad* 4 (1992), I, p. 95 (Hebrew) and R. Elimelekh of Lysansk, *No'am Elimelekh*, fol. 18a.

⁸⁹ *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 32, ch. 3; II, fol. 79a. For more on Cordovero and the Great Chain of Being see Garb, ‘Power and *Kavvanah*’, pp. 249–250.

⁹⁰ Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 27, ch. 2; II, fol. 59c. See Bracha Sack, ‘A Fragment of R. Moses Cordovero’s Commentary on Ra’aya Meheimna’, *Qoves ‘al Yad Minora Manuscripta Hebraica* NS (10) 20 (1982), pp. 270–271.

⁹¹ See also Sack, ibidem, p. 270 note 52.

⁹² See *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 22, ch. 1; II, fol. 78bc. More on this text in Idel, Hasidism, pp. 100–102 and the relevant footnotes, as well as in Idel, *BEN: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, ch. 4 (forthcoming).

The man upon whom his Creator has bestowed the grace of entering the inner aspect of the occult lore [i.e. Kabbalah] knows and understands that by reciting *barekh 'aleinu* and *refa'enu* the intention is to draw down the blessing and the influx by each and every blessing to a certain *sefirah*, and the blessing of *refa'enu* to a certain *sefirah*, as is known to us. Behold, this man is worshiping the Holy One, blessed be He and his *Shekhinah* as a son and a servant standing before his master, by means of perfect worship, out of love, without deriving any benefit or reward from this worship [...] because the wise man [namely the kabbalist] by the quality of his [mystical] intention [*kavvanah*] which he intends during his prayer, his soul will be elevated by his [spiritual] arousal from one degree to another, from one entity to another⁹³ until she arrives and is welcome and comes in the presence of the Creator, and cleaves to her source, to the source of life; and then a great influx will be emanated upon her from there, and he will become a vessel⁹⁴ and a place and foundation for [that] influx, and from him it [the influx] will be distributed⁹⁵ [...] until the *Shekhinah* will cleave to him [...] and you will be a seat for Her and [then] the influx will descend on you [...] because you replace the great conduit in the place of the *saddiq*, the foundation of the world.⁹⁶

The conduit and the *saddiq* should be understood theosophically as standing for the ninth *sefirah*. However, the human perfectus is defined as capable of replacing and functioning as a median entity between the divine and the human realms. This view, which was explicitly formulated by Cordovero, was expanded upon by Azulai.⁹⁷

He apparently liked this passage by Cordovero and copied it once more in his *Hesed le-'Avraham*.⁹⁸ However, just before quoting it, he reiterates, or perhaps develops, a theory concerning the intention of prayer which has direct bearing on the interactive 'cord' approach:

⁹³ The Hebrew term translated as 'entity' is *sibbah*. Cordovero also mentions here the ascent from one *Illah* to another. The expression of ascending from one degree, or gradation to another, became a *topos* in Hasidism.

⁹⁴ *Keli*. This term is absent in Cordovero's version of this passage though it occurs elsewhere in Cordovero's writings.

⁹⁵ *Yithalleq*. Another pertinent translation is 'will be divided'.

⁹⁶ Azulai, *Massekhet 'Avot*, Jerusalem 1986, fol. 3a. I prefer to analyze this version, because it has some formulations that synthesize the views of Cordovero.

⁹⁷ See, in addition to the above quote from Cordovero, also his *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 24 ch. 13, II, fol. 52c, and Azulai's commentary on the Song of Songs, ch. 1, printed in Azulai's *Ba'alei Berit 'Avram*, fol. 94b.

⁹⁸ fol. 14a.

The issue of *kavvanah* in prayer: Know that since man is part of God on high, bound to the chains of Holiness [sharsherot ha-qedushah] by the chain of the [descending] emanation of his degree⁹⁹ from one degree to another, behold this chain will become a ladder upon which the arousal of his deed will ascend so that the supernal sefirot will be unified by him and by means of his act the influx of blessing will be drawn down to the sefirot, from the first to the last one, and from there to the lower degrees until it reaches and dwells upon him by means of this ladder. In accordance with the measure of his arousal and the fitness of his deed, so the breadth of the conduit will be enhanced, and the illumination of the supernal influx.¹⁰⁰

In this text, the conduit and the chain are reverberations of the Plotinian vision of the relation between the lower and the supernal soul. Each soul has its personal chain and conduit, a view found earlier in Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*.¹⁰¹ The breadth of the conduit reflects the amount of the influx that descends from above. This is an interesting combination of the 'Great Chain of Being'-image integrated with the image of chain in late thirteenth century Kabbalah, along with ecstatic and talismanic theories, which serves to forge a complex theory of prayer.

However, the triggering factors for the drawing down are not ontological but rather human activities: namely the words uttered and the emotional investment, the arousal. The prime feature of the quote above is the dynamic role played by the image of the chain; it is not only a symbol for the continuum

⁹⁹ *Shalshelet hishtalshelut madregato*. In *Kenaf Renanim*, the version is *shalshelet hishtalshelut nishemato mi-madregah le-madregah*.

¹⁰⁰ *Hesed le-'Avraham*, fols. 13d-14a. See also *ibidem*, fol. 27a. The passage is also found in Azulai's *Sefer Kenaf Renanim*, Jerusalem 1992, p. 2. Though presenting itself as a collection of Lurianic traditions about the intention of prayer, Azulai depends on the main views of Cordovero. See also *ibidem*, pp. 3-5. A similar case is also R. Shlomo Rocca, a second seventeenth century kabbalist in Venice. See his *Qavvanat Shlomo*, fol. 74c.

¹⁰¹ Gate 31, ch. 11; II, fol. 77d; Gate 32, ch. 1; II fol. 78a; R. Abraham Galante, *Qinat Setarim*, fol. 49b. The first source in Kabbalah where the concept of the personal chain of the soul is mentioned is Nahmanides' poem *Me-Rosh me-Qadmei 'Olamin*, where the phrase *shalshelet hayyati*, the chain of my life, occurs in a context that assumes that the soul stems from a high sefirah. See *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, I, p. 392. Nahmanides was acquainted with Neoplatonic sources, not all of them identifiable, and I assume that he was influenced by one of these sources. See Idel, 'NAHMANIDES: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership', *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership*, eds. M. Idel - M. Ostow, Northvale 1998, pp. 56-57.

between the supernal divine and the soul of man, but also, and primarily, the background for an explanation of the manner in which Jewish liturgy operates. The chain, like in da Vidas' passage, has a dual purpose: to allow for the ascent, in particular of the righteous, but also the descent, and the drawing down of the influx. Mysticism is combined here with magic, and generates a mystico-magical model that is one of the keys to Hasidism.¹⁰² This model owes much to the formulations of Cordovero and his school, as alluded to above, and it represents a crucial development in Jewish mysticism. It serves as a turning point in the slow process of giving priority to prayer over the study of the Torah, a move that will be discussed below in more detail in context of the Besht's self-awareness.

However, for our purpose it is important to emphasize the personal aspect of the liturgical experience: in the last two passages the praying individual serves as a conduit between the two worlds not only by his own ascent on high but also by mediating through both his body – according to the first quote – and his soul – according to the second – the descent of divine vitality. Thus prayer may lead, according to these kabbalists, to an encounter between God and the kabbalist. However, the importance attributed to causing the descent of energy dramatically reduces the dialogical aspect of this encounter, as emphasized by Martin Buber.

As pointed out in earlier footnotes, Cordovero's theory of prayer had a strong impact on early Hasidic sources. R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy alludes to this passage in his *Ben Porat Yosef*, and he supplies incontrovertible proof for the direct links between Cordovero and the theory of the *saddiq* and prayer in early Hasidism.¹⁰³ One additional example suffices to illustrate this point:

The human body¹⁰⁴ is not considered to be only the flesh, but rather the soul within it is the [real] man, and so also all the commandments, even those dependent on speech as the commandment of prayer, the commandment to study Torah and the [saying of] Blessings of Enjoyments.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² See Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 103-145.

¹⁰³ fol. 21a.

¹⁰⁴ The comparison of letters or sounds to the human body is influenced by R. Solomon Alqabetz and Cordovero. See also the Great Maggid's view in *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 52 and 'Or ha-'Emmet, fol. 8c.

¹⁰⁵ See *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 27, 2; II, fol. 60a. For the image of letters as vessels, see R. Shem Tov ben Shem Tov, *Sefer ha-'Emmunot*, fols. 27a, 59a, 98b, 104b and 105a. The later kabbalistic discussions of the image of body or vessel drawing down

Interestingly enough, Cordovero tries to avoid the use of the term *ruhaniyyut* in magical-astral contexts; when dealing with the act of drawing the supernal forces from the planets downwards, he uses the term *koah*.¹⁰⁶ The pronounced letters are only a vessel and garment. The individual must draw downwards the spiritual forces of the *sefirot* – together with the light of '*Ein Sof* which vivifies them – into the interior part of the letters when he is pronouncing them.¹⁰⁷

A crucial feature in understanding the transition from the Cordoverian to the early Hasidic theory is the fact that R. Jacob Joseph quotes the 'Hasid R. Y[ehudah]' apparently R. Yehudah Leib of Pistin, in relation to prayer:

By the combinations of letters and words a vessel is produced to draw down the influx and blessing for [the people of] Israel.¹⁰⁸

Elsewhere in the same book he quotes R. Nahman of Kossov, to the effect that speech generates a vessel to draw the influx into it and this view appears elsewhere in another of his books:

The speech [of the prayer] becomes vessels into which the efflux of influx is infused.¹⁰⁹

This concept of letters as vessels apparently influenced the Hasidic use of words such as 'ark' – *tevah*.¹¹⁰ This interpretation of the meaning of *tevah* is also

emanations stem from *Sefer ha-Emmunot*, fols. 59a, 98b. Compare also to Cordovero's texts printed by Bracha Sack, 'More on the Metamorphosis of the Dictum "God, Torah and Israel Are One Unit"', *Qiryat Sefer* 57 (1982) p. 184 (Hebrew). Compare this sentence to the monadic nature of letters discussed in Idel, *Hasidism*, pp. 154–156, and Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 30; ch. 2, fols. 68c–72a. It is worth noting that according to Cordovero, not only written letters, i.e. consonants, are endowed with spiritual force, but also vowels, *nequddot*, which are more rarely represented in written Hebrew; see *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 29, ch. 5; II, fol. 68c: *ruhaniyyut ha-nequddot*.

¹⁰⁶ See R. Moses Cordovero, *Derishot*, pp. 82, 84, 86; however, see *ibidem*, pp. 37–38.

¹⁰⁷ *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 3a. Compare also to *ibidem*, fols. 6a, 167ab. See however his *Ben Porat Yosef*, fol. 32d, where *Hesed le-Avraham* is explicitly quoted again, and also *ibidem*, fols. 17c, 23cd where closely parallel passages are found.

¹⁰⁸ *ibidem*, fol. 23c.

¹⁰⁹ R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 62b. This view is incorporated in R. Jacob Joseph's formulation of the same attitude, immediately following this quotation. See *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, fol. 26b. Compare to *ibidem*, fol. 3a. See also Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Quietistic Elements*, p. 111.

¹¹⁰ See, especially, R. Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudylkov, *Degel Mahaneh Efrayim*, p. 9 and R. Jacob Joseph's *Ben Porat Yosef*, fols. 19d.

found in the Great Maggid and his circles and it is plausible that it reflects an earlier source, apparently the Besht himself.¹¹¹

Thus Cordovero's view as presented and mediated by Azulai was endorsed by two important members of the circle of 'pneumatics' as shown in the writings of one of the main followers of the Besht. In R. Joseph Jacob there is also an explicit statement in which he quotes the traditions of Cordovero in the name of his teacher, the Besht.

Man – the Besht is reported to have said – causes by his prayer and [study of] the Torah an abundance which comes upon all the worlds and also the angels are nourished by his Torah and prayer.¹¹²

The author continues to describe the Besht as 'being careful to [recite] each and every letter, vowel and word, to pronounce it as appropriate'¹¹³ and I assume that the two topics are related to each other. The above views of prayer were explicitly adopted as well by R. Meshullam Phoebus of Zbarazh from *Pardes Rimmonim* through a quotation in the introduction to R. Isaiah Horovitz's commentary on the Prayerbook entitled *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*:

'When a person pronounces the letters, he moves the supernal vitality, and when he cleaves by his thought in a complete form to God, he returns the vitality which emanated from the supernal thought until it reached the speech and is placed in the mouth of man; and he longs through the words of the prayer for God, by his causing the sounds to fly upwards to their source [...] if he succeeds in drawing downwards the spiritual force from above onto his words, in order to cause the pronounced letters to fly upwards, as it is written in *Pardes Rimmonim*.¹¹⁴

The 'longing' of man, as well as all other creatures for God became a Hasidic commonplace, attenuating the more mechanistic nature of many of the

¹¹¹ See the quote in the name of the Besht in '*Or ha-'Emmet*', fol. 18b and the one in the name of the Great Maggid in R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev, *Qedushat Levi*, Jerusalem 1972, fol. 139a; *Ba'al Shem Tov*, I, pp. 119–123. See also Idel, 'Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism', ed. S. Katz, *Mysticism and Language*, Oxford, New York 1992, p. 73 note 6.

¹¹² *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 172c.

¹¹³ ibidem.

¹¹⁴ R. Meshullam Phoebus of Zbarazh, *Yosher Divrei 'Emmet*, fol. 132a. See also R. Abraham Yehoshu'a Heschel of Apt, '*Ohev Yisrael*', fol. 73a. It should be mentioned that elsewhere, R. Meshullam Phoebus quotes a definition of *kavvanah* from R. Isaiah Horowitz's *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, fol. 26c.

kabbalistic discussions above.¹¹⁵ The idea that through the utterances of the words of prayer someone is able to draw down supernal powers was most likely one of the common denominators of the circles that contributed to the creation of the early Hasidic movement. These views were paraphrased later by R. Aharon of Zhitomir, a follower of R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev,¹¹⁶ while another master from the same town, R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, claims that the view that the letters are vessels 'is well known in the books' an indication as to the written source of this fundamental understanding of Hasidic view of prayer.¹¹⁷ It is quite plausible that the latter had in mind books from Cordovero's school. The two basic vectors characterizing contacts with the divine in Hasidism, the more Neo-Platonic dealing with divestment of corporeality and cleaving on high, and the talismanic, generated competing descriptions of the nature of the Hasidic perfecti. One of the most powerful descriptions of the superiority of the talismanic *şaddiq*, when compared to the one who undergoes a unitive experience which may culminate in annihilation by remaining fascinated with the divine, is found in a description of 'perfect prayer'. According to R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev, prayer that brings down an efflux is perfect, while that of the extreme righteous that does not return from the mystical experience is not. The latter do not merit of the title of 'performing' righteous, *şaddiqim po'alim*, and the prayer of the non-performative *şaddiq*, whose mystical experience is an end-experience, is called 'incomplete' as the influx is not attracted.¹¹⁸

5. PRAYER AS CORD: A COMPARATIVE EXAMPLE

The ecstatic and magical aspects of prayer suggest that linguistic performances

¹¹⁵ See e.g. *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, II, fol. 3c, where he indicates his source as the renowned eighteenth century Moroccan author R. Ḥayyim ben Atṭar's *'Or ha-Ḥayyim* on Gen. 2:1, where indeed an interesting discussion of a cosmic desire to cleave to the light of God occurs. See also R. Israel of Ryzhin, *Irin Qaddishin*, fols. 36d-37a.

¹¹⁶ *Toledot 'Aharon*, II, fol. 36b. See also a similar view in *'Or ha-'Emmet*, fol. 39c. See also R. Qalonimus Qalman Epstein, *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, I, fol. 21b and R. Ḥayyim Turer of Chernovitz, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, fols. 110ad, 112c.

¹¹⁷ See *'Or ha-Meir*, fol. 14d.

¹¹⁸ See *Qedushat Levi*, fol. 65bc. See also a passage by R. Nathan of Nemirov discussed in Green, *Devotion and Commandments*, pp. 61, 90 note 126, on the need to return from the experience of self-abnegation and then to attract the light into measures and vessels. See also R. Pinhas Menahem Eleazar of Piltz, in *Gur Siftei Şaddiq* Jerusalem 1956, fol. 71a.

are privileged moments for encountering the divine. However, many of the theosophical-theurgical kabbalists adopted another attitude, in which it is possible to have an impact on the divine via the act of prayer. These various theurgical positions define a dynamic divine realm found in continuous interaction with human liturgical deeds.¹¹⁹ Few of these discussions expressly refer to the image of a cord, though an example exists in the quote from R. Elijah da Vidas mentioned in chapter 1, section 3.

Although the more dynamic views were widespread and quite influential in many kabbalistic circles, they also encountered criticism. The more philosophically oriented Jewish authors were much less interested in the vocal aspects of prayer, as we learn from certain polemics by kabbalists against anonymous detractors of the importance of pronouncing words during prayer.¹²⁰ Even more problematic was the possibility that God, defined in philosophical terms as perfect and as an intellectual being, would hear the words and react to them. They were much more inclined toward a vision of prayer as a moment of recollection, of contemplation, of search for an apprehension of the divine, or even a mystical union. The medieval Jewish philosophers were above all concerned with the intellectual, or inner prayer, a time involving a process of assimilation of their intellect to the divine one, or at least a certain knowledge of its nature.¹²¹ This view shows similarities with the Neo-Platonic theory of contemplation and at times prayer found in influential

¹¹⁹ Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 156-199; idem, 'On R. Isaac Sagi Nahor', idem, 'Kabbalistic Prayer in Provence', *Tarbiz* 62 (1993), pp. 265-286 (Hebrew); Elliot Wolfson, 'Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*', *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times* 3 (1988), pp. 41-80.

¹²⁰ See R. Jacob ben Sheshet's *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, as analyzed by Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age* Mouton, Paris 1962, pp. 111-112, 356-371. See also the anonymous '*Peraqim bi-Yihud*', ed. Georges Vajda, *Qoves 'al Yad* 15 (1950), pp. 122-123; R. Nissim of Marseille, *Ma'aresh Nissim*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Jerusalem 2000, p. 79.

¹²¹ See the recurrent vision of prayer that should be preceded by the knowledge of the precise nature of God in a variety of medieval sources such as R. Yehudah ha-Levi's poem dedicated to R. Meir ibn Qamiel, R. Bahya ibn Paqudah's *Hovat ha-Levavot*, *Sha'ar ha-Yihud*, ch. 2; or R. Samuel ben Mordekhai's epistle, Ms. Vatican-Neofiti 11, fol. 203a; and the anonymous *Iggeret Teshuvah*, ed. A Berliner, attributed to R. Isaac ibn Latif, printed in *Qoves 'al Yad* 1 (1885), p. 64. See also Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, pp. 207-208.

writers such as Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus,¹²² and adopted by Pseudo-Dionysius in the context of prayer which was available in the West in different Latin translations from the twelfth century onwards. In his *The Divine Names* this Christian mystic describes the moment of prayer in terms of drawing closer to God with a cable, one of whose extremities is attached to God.

Let us then elevate our very selves by our prayers to the higher ascent of the divine and good rays as if a luminous chain were suspended from the celestial heights and reaching down hither we, by ever clutching this upwards first with one hand and then with the other, seem indeed to draw it, but in reality we do not draw it down, it being both above and below, but ourselves are carried upwards to the higher splendors of the luminous rays. Or, as though, after we have embarked on a ship, and are holding on to cables reaching from some rock, such as are given out, as it were, for us to seize, we do not draw the rock to us but ourselves in fact and the ship to the rock.¹²³

Pseudo-Dionysius was influenced by both the Platonic vision of the *aurea catena*, the golden chain, and Proclus's view of prayer.¹²⁴ However, in this passage, prayer becomes much less an ontic principle which expresses continuity, gradation or concatenation, than a symbol for a psychological process which brings a person closer to the divine. Change indeed is assumed to be possible during prayer, but it consists of coming closer to the divinity. God, though omnipresent in principle remains, however unchanged, and the only shift which takes place through liturgy is in man. Though dealing explicitly with prayer, language is not involved at all. A contemplative recollection of the chain of being brings us closer to the divine realm.

This passage was translated for the first time into Hebrew by the late

¹²² See *Enneads*, IV.4.40-44; *De mysteriis Egyptorum*, I,12:42, 2-5; I,13:43, 8; V,26:237, 16-236, 6 and for Proclus the text translated by Copenhaver, 'Hermes Trismegistus', pp. 103-105 as well as Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi, Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Baltimore 1987, pp. 117-119.

¹²³ III:3, tr. J. Parker, in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Oxford 1897, I, pp. 27-28, *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works*, tr. Colm Luibheid, New York, etc. 1987, pp. 68-69 note 126.

¹²⁴ More on this passage and its Neoplatonic source see René Roques, *L'univers dionysien, structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys* Paris 1983, pp. 128-129 and McGinn, *The Golden Chain*, pp. 69-70; Heiler, *Prayer*, p. 201. Interestingly enough, though Lovejoy was aware of the importance of Pseudo-Dionysius' view in general, he fails to deal with this precise passage. See his *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 67-68.

thirteenth or early fourteenth century Jewish philosopher R. Yehudah Romano from Aegidius Romanus' Latin translation of Pseudo-Dionysius.¹²⁵ It was quoted by the mid-fourteenth century Byzantine author R. Elnathan ben Moses Qalqish in his eclectic book *'Even Sappir*, which also includes kabbalistic material.¹²⁶ It would be interesting to discover whether this text was also known to other kabbalists, and even more crucially, whether it had something to do with the theory of the cord found in R. Yehudah Ḥayyat, and R. Elijah da Vidas' cord of sounds which ascends on high and has theurgical and magical effects.¹²⁷ The profound influence of *The Divine Names* on Marsilio Ficino, his translation of the book into Latin and his commentary which were printed and hence more widely disseminated, make it plausible that both Ḥayyat and the Safedian kabbalists were acquainted with it. If so, they might have reacted to the implicit denial of the possibility of prayer to change something in extra-subjective reality by their emphasis on theurgical efficacy.

The image of the cord found its way as well into early Christian Kabbalah. In his *Heptaplus*, Pico asserts that Homer's *catena aurea* was alluded to by Moses, without any specific indication as to where Moses dealt with such a concept.¹²⁸ Apparently drawing on Pico, Johann Reuchlin wrote:

At illud bonum quod Deus nominatur, non plane a nobis poterit ob nostrae conditionis fragilitatem, nisi gradibus atque scalis ascendi, quae quidem ut uos loqui consueuistis instar Homericae catenae, ut uero Iudaei nos secundum divina eloquia dicimus certe ad speciem scalae Iacob patris nostri de

¹²⁵ See J.B. Sermonetta, 'Una transcrizione in caratteri ebraici di alcuni brani filosofici della Divina Commedia', *Romanica et Occidentalia: Etudes dédiées à la mémoire de H. Peri*, ed. Moshe Lazar, Jerusalem 1963, pp. 30-31 note 21.

¹²⁶ See Ms. Paris BN 728, fol. 179a.

¹²⁷ See above, chapter 1 sections 2, 3. On the possibility that the view of Cordovero on the chain of love stems from Neoplatonic sources see above ch. 1 note 59 and the material quoted by Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, tr. Ph. S. Watson, New York, Evanston 1969, pp. 446, 570-571 and my discussion in *Kabbalah and Eros*, ch. 5.

¹²⁸ See Proem part V; *Heplaplus*, tr. J. B. McGaw, New York 1977, p. 70. Pico's views in *Oratio* and *Heptaplus* were apparently combined by Giovanni Nesi, a Florentine defender of Savonarola. In 1497, his *Oraculum de Novo Saeculo* was published, and therein we read: 'Divinorum autem scientia qua veluti aurea quadam cathena in coelum trahimur pro ancilla uititur. Christiana uero theologia; qua veluti supremo schalarum Jacob gradu in coelum ascendimus pro domina atque matistra'. Quoted from D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology*, Duckworth 1972, p. 57, note 2. Here, Homer's *catena aurea* is closely related to Jacob's ladder, and they are connected to the study of theology as the supreme goal, exactly as Pico asserts in his *Oratio*.

supercoelestibus porriguntur in terram, tanquam restis quaedam nut filnis aurea coeiitus ad nos directa veluti linen visualis uarias penetrans naturas.¹²⁹

What appears new in Reuchlin's passage is the occurrence of the golden cable and the visual line. However these two motifs seem to be an almost verbatim use of Pseudo-Dionysius's similes found in his *Divine Names*. Reuchlin added, presumably under the influence of Pico's identification of the ladder with *natura*, the fact that the rays pervade nature. The occurrence of Pseudo-Dionysius in Reuchlin's discussion seems to be a result of a deliberate choice; he added Christian 'ancient' theology to the biblical ladder and Homeric chain, evidently adhering to the assumption of *philosophia perennis* hinted at in Pico's treatment of Jacob's ladder. But Reuchlin apparently intended to achieve more than to apply Pseudo-Dionysius to the earlier discussions; the quoted passage from *De Arte Cabalistica* is part of a speech attributed to him to a kabbalist. Might the author have intentionally used a Christian source in the speech of a Jew in order to imply the tacit agreement of Kabbalah with Pseudo-Dionysius? It is interesting to note that in another famous symposium of persons representing differing religions, J. Bodin's colloquium *Heptapleomeres*, we find the following text:

Senamus: What then will happen to Plato who, in accordance with the opinion of Homer, represents a golden chain let down by Jupiter from heaven[...]

Salomon: I think the Homeric chain is nothing other than the ladder represented in the nocturnal vision of Jacob the Patriarch. God was at the top of the ladder, and angels descended from the top of heaven to the earth and then ascended again to heaven.¹³⁰

This use of the Homeric and Platonic chain of being demonstrates the profound affinity between these analyses and their Greek and Hellenic sources. They are characterized by a metaphysical impulse much less than by the operative one which was attributed to the Jews. The theurgical and magical elements of

¹²⁹ *De Arte Cabalistica* ed. I. Pistorius Basle, 1581, p. 687.

¹³⁰ See M. L. D. Kuntz, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, Princeton 1975, p. 32. See also her 'Pythagorean Cosmology and Its Identification in Bodin's Colloquium Heptalomers', in Kuntz, *Jacob's Tree*, p. 256. Kuntz did not mention the similarity between Reuchlin's works and those of Jean Bodin. The common attribution of a Jewish interpretation of Homer's chain to a Jew is interesting evidence for a certain influence of Reuchlin on Bodin. Once again, a Jew points out the similarity of Jacob's ladder to Plato's or Homer's *aurea catena*.

prayer are missing altogether.

One of the few critiques of kabbalistic theurgical prayer is found in the writings of R. Yehudah Arie of Modena, a late sixteenth and early seventeenth century rabbinic figure active in Venice. In general he was sharply critical of Kabbalah but he was especially opposed to the possibility of making any changes in the deity. To provide an alternative to the theurgical understanding of prayer as expounded by R. Moses Cordovero, Modena relates a parable by an author who is referred to by the uncommon title of the 'least of the preachers'. Apparently the Christian mystic had somehow made his way to the Venetian Rabbi who was, presumably, aware of the original Christian source. In any case, three of his contemporaries, one of whom was an acquaintance of Modena, were familiar with Pseudo-Dionysius.¹³¹ Interestingly enough, he proposes the Christian mystical solution to the question of how prayer can be influential provided that God does not change, to denigrate kabbalistic visions of prayer:

Indeed, I heard, but I did not understand, the sin someone commits when he directs his prayer to God without [directing his thought] to the *sefirot* for because of His absolute unity, He cannot change His will. But even the least of the preachers can solve this [quandary] for the understanding of the ignoramus, [using] a simple parable. This [problem] is similar to the [situation of] someone on a ship in a river who throws a cable onto a pillar or a tree on the shore and pulls the ship hard and so brings it near the shore. But whoever sees this may say that he draws the banks of the river to the ship and so he comes near the shore. But this is not so, since the ship comes near the shore by drawing, whereas the shore stands firm forever. So is the prayer [like] a cable which is seized above on His will, which does not change itself but the one praying who was at first remote comes near by his prayer to his God.¹³²

What is fascinating in the strategy adopted by Leone Modena to counteract the kabbalistic theurgical view of prayer is the fact that he criticized this Jewish mystical lore because it was instrumental in conversions of kabbalists to

¹³¹ See R. Joseph Shlomo Rofe' del Medigo of Candia, *Maṣref le-Hokhma*, Warsaw 1890, fol. 45b. See also R. Menasseh ben Israel, *The Conciliator*, I p. 5, II p. 251; and R. Abraham Kohen Herrera, cf. Yosha, *Myth and Metaphor: Abraham Herrera's Philosophical Interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1994, p. 403, sub voce, Dionysius. In some instances, Pseudo-Dionysius was used by Christian kabbalists and was even described as a Christian kabbalist. See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 117-129 and Idel, 'Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah', p. 176 note 187.

¹³² 'Ari Nohem, ed. N.S. Leibowitch rpr. Jerusalem 1971, p. 27 (Hebrew).

Christianity.¹³³ In other words, though he suspected Kabbalah theologically of affinities with Christianity and Neo-Platonism, it was a Christian Neoplatonist from late antiquity, representing the quintessence of ancient Christian mysticism who was, anonymously, presented as the true alternative to the kabbalistic understanding of prayer. The concept of perfection of the unchangeable God guides the solution of the Christian Neoplatonic mystic, the very opposite of many kabbalists' fundamental understanding of the dynamic nature of the sefirotic realm, and the magical valences of the results of prayer. Modena's critique of Kabbalah was answered by the nineteenth century Jewish thinker, R. Elijah Benamozegh. The latter did not suspect that the parable came from non-Jewish sources, and asserts that:

The parable of the ship is not sufficient at all to negate the change in the essence of God, exalted be He, from the [attribute of] mercy to [stern] judgment or vice versa. We indeed believe that by virtue of our prayer, God, blessed be He, fulfills our requests, and hears our supplications, and if so we should deny the special quality of prayer to stir the goodness of the great God toward us. Alternatively, we would fall into the trap of admitting that faith allows change [in God] and we shall have to admit that by the virtue of our prayer God will change from the attribute of judgment to that of mercy, but this would be a deficiency in the essence of the simple and unchangeable substance.¹³⁴

Benamozegh was doubtless acquainted with Pseudo-Dionysius' writings, as is obvious from the quote from one of his books. The quote suggests that the views expressed by Pseudo-Dionysius were close to kabbalistic ones.¹³⁵ He apparently never discovered that Modena, and indirectly also himself, had espoused a solution proposed by a Christian mystic. The question of Benamozegh's acquaintance with Pseudo-Dionysius on the one hand and his failure to notice Modena's source on the other cannot easily be resolved. Benamozegh wants the 'least of the preachers' to come and solve the quandary, and wonders whether a reasonable solution can be found without resorting to the principles of Kabbalah. If the preacher can solve the problem, he would be worthy, he says, of the title of the 'head of the savants'. Benamozegh does not suggest an original solution, but points out that the quandary can be solved if Kabbalah is accepted as a viable avenue.¹³⁶

¹³³ For some details of the critique see Idel, 'Differing Conceptions', pp. 166-168.

¹³⁴ *'Eimat Mafgi'a*, Leghorn 1855, fol. 13a.

¹³⁵ See his *Ta'am le-Shad*, Leghorn 1863, p. 193.

¹³⁶ *'Eimat Mafgi'a*, p. 13a.

Modena's juxtaposition of the quote from Pseudo-Dionysius in its Hebrew form with kabbalistic visions of prayer is emblematic of a much broader issue – the confrontation between the Greek-philosophically oriented mode of thought, including its Christian version, and some forms of Jewish more dynamic forms which Eric Voegelin describes as 'metastatic'. This confrontation was, from the Middle Ages onward, not a matter of Jewish versus Greek-oriented thinkers, but an inner struggle, and one that prompted a polarization of ideas in the writings of Jewish elites.

6. REVELATION AND EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE PRAYING VOICE

Unlike biblical sources where the divine voice is directly active in the act of revelation, in some rabbinic sources God is said to speak with a voice like or identical to the voice of Moses.¹³⁷ According to a medieval formulation, the divine presence spoke from the throat of Moses, a view somewhat different from rabbinic sources in late antiquity.¹³⁸ These views were taken up in philosophical contexts which did not ascribe any modality of speech to the divinity. In a brief observation, R. Abraham ibn Ezra states that:

And after we knew that the Torah spoke in human language, for the one who speaks is man, and likewise the one who hears is man, and a man cannot speak things to one who is higher than himself or lower than himself, but only by way of 'the image of man'.¹³⁹

He also takes a similar position elsewhere in his commentary on the Bible:

Know that man's soul is supernal and honorable, and that it comes from the intermediate world, and the body is from the lowly world, and nothing speaks in the lowly world but man himself, and man also hears, for that which speaks to him, he wishes to understand what is in his heart, and the intellectual person cannot create any language, but only that which is known to him [...] And

¹³⁷ See the rabbinic sources collected and discussed by Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, II, pp. 267–268.

¹³⁸ See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia 1946, vol. 6, p. 36, note 201; Werblowsky. *Joseph Karo*, p. 269 note 2.

¹³⁹ *Commentary on Genesis* 1:26.

behold, when man speaks to man in human matters and in a language which he understands, he will surely understand his words.¹⁴⁰

The mentalistic vision of the divinity which precludes a vocal manifestation of a divine message by means of divine organs thus presumes that the only voice involved in the prophetic process is the human one. This constitutes a departure from the midrashic vision, which deals with Moses' prophetic experience alone. Ibn Ezra expands on the use of the human voice as a vehicle for the revelation to all types of revelations. Similarly, R. Abraham Abulafia, who followed both ibn Ezra¹⁴¹ and Maimonides writes:

And it is likewise said:¹⁴² 'And he heard the voice speaking to him', which they translated as *mitmallel*, like *mitdabber*, i.e., in the reflexive case. This is likewise the secret of¹⁴³ 'in a vision I will make myself known to him', and also of¹⁴⁴ 'I will hear the one speaking to me'. Likewise¹⁴⁵ 'Moses spoke and God answered him with a voice', which they interpreted: 'in the voice of Moses'. And this is a wondrous and hidden secret.¹⁴⁶

The secret Abulafia alludes to here is probably that the prophetic revelation is not a concrete external apparition representing a hypostatic hierophany of the divine, but rather an imaginary projection of the human psyche which reveals secrets to the prophet through his own voice. The prophetic experience is not a dialogue between the revealer and the recipient, but a monologue in which the intellectual message is transformed into a human voice. A similar, though not identical, theory is found in Safed, in the angelic tutor known as Maggid as formulated by Qaro, which was discussed above in chapter 3, section 6. In one

¹⁴⁰ See the long version of his commentary to Exodus 19:20. See also his commentary to Daniel 10:1, and *Yesod Mora*, where the saying 'the one who speaks is human and the one who hears too is human', is repeated. Cf. Georges Vajda, *Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka* Paris 1954, p. 140, note 1; Colette Sirat, *Les Théories des visions surnaturelles*, Leiden 1964, p. 77; Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, II, pp. 278-279.

¹⁴¹ See, e.g., the Abulafian *Sefer ha-Marde'a*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1649, fol. 215b.

¹⁴² Numbers 10:87.

¹⁴³ *ibidem* 12:6.

¹⁴⁴ Ezek. 2:2.

¹⁴⁵ Exodus 19:19.

¹⁴⁶ *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 12a. See also Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 140a. Additional passages of Abulafia's were translated and analyzed in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 84-86.

of R. Ḥayyim Vital's books we read that:

The secret of prophecy is certainly a voice sent from above to speak to this prophet, and the Holy Spirit is likewise in this manner. However, because the voice is supernal and spiritual, it is impossible for it to be made corporeal and enter the ears of the prophet, unless it is first embodied, in that same physical voice which emerged from the prophet while engaged in [the study of the] Torah and prayer and the like. It then embodies itself in it and is connected to it and comes to the ears of the prophet, so that he hears. But without the human voice it cannot exist [...] that selfsame supernal voice comes and is embodied within his voice.¹⁴⁷

Unlike the ecstatic kabbalists, who resorted to the technique of combining letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the divine names; i.e. an anomian technique, Vital argues that the divine 'voice' enters the human one during involvement with nomian texts, i.e. Torah and Prayer. This shift, which connects prayer and prophecy, most likely has something to do with an influential passage found in R. Jacob ben Asher's *'Arba'ah Turim*, *'Orah Ḥayyim*, *Hilkhot Tefillah*, §98, and then in R. Joseph Qaro's *Shulhan 'Arukha*, where by means of intense prayer it is possible to reach a level close to that of prophecy, without mention of any recourse to divine names. In any case, Vital quotes this position in a version of his book mentioned above.¹⁴⁸ The switch from the anomian to the nomian understanding of the embodiment of the voice is characteristic of the next stage of Jewish mysticism: Hasidism. The founder of the movement was reported to have said:

The Besht said that the supernal topics he had merit to receive as a revelation [come] not as the result of his intense study of the Talmud [*lo' mi-penei shelamad harbbeih ha-Shas*] and legalistic authors [*Poseqim*] but solely because of the prayer he always prayed with great *kavvanah*, and this is the reason why he merited the high degree.¹⁴⁹

Thus, unlike Vital, where both the study of the Torah and prayer were described

¹⁴⁷ *Sefer ha-Gilgulin*, Vilna 1866, fol. 60ab. See also the reverberation of this view in R. Nahman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Moharan*, I, fols. 27b, 28a, and R. Isaac Aizic Yehudah Safrin of Komarno, *Zohar Hai*, vol. I fols. 5c, 6ab.

¹⁴⁸ See *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulin*, I, fol. 48a.

¹⁴⁹ The Maggid of Medzerich, *'Or ha-'Emmet*, fol. 84a and R. Menahem Mendel of Rimanov's book *Tlana' de-Ḥayyei*, fol. 56b. The same attitude is found, without mentioning the Besht, in an interesting passage by R. Qalonimus Qalman Epstein of Cracow, *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, I, p. 76.

as inducing a prophetic voice, in the case of the Besht, at least here, it is solely prayer that induced his revelations. This view is reminiscent of a theory that connected prayer and prophecy found in the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz circles.¹⁵⁰ In any case, the stress on prayer is part of a much greater interest in liturgical performance characteristic of Hasidism. However, the more immanentist approach adopted by Hasidic thinkers attenuated the importance of the 'chain' theme, allowing much more direct contact with the divine realm. The Besht's revelation was thought to have been achieved when the divine voice entered the human voice. According to another tradition attributed to the Great Maggid:

When someone starts to pray immediately after saying:¹⁵¹ 'My Lord, Thou open my lips', the *Shekhinah* clothes itself in him and utters these utterances. And when he believes that the *Shekhinah* utters these utterances, an awe and reverence will fill him. And the Holy One, Blessed be He, as though He concentrated Himself and dwelled upon him.¹⁵²

The Hasidic master interprets the opening verse of the Eighteen Benedictions in a quite interesting manner: whereas the plain sense of the verse is a plea for God to open the lips of the praying person from the outside, here the opening of the lips comes from the divine inside the individual. The real entity who prays is none other than the divine presence. It is the divine who prays and not the human. The latter may initiate the prayer but he is immediately overtaken by the divine. Thus, the act of prayer does not address a transcendental divinity, but triggers the entry of the divine presence into man, and his words in turn trigger an act of concentration of the supernal God. The human voice thus serves not only as the substratum of the supernal voice, its mode of self-realization. In a more concrete manner, divine presence takes possession of the human vocal apparatus during prayer. Thus, prayer becomes a moment of mystical experience, and only initially consists of the more commonplace address of a lower entity to the higher. Though the praying *Shekhinah* apparently obliterates human consciousness during prayer in other instances in Hasidism, it is seemingly not the case in this specific context. There is a certain distance between the praying organon and the mystic who can still observe the

¹⁵⁰ See chapter 2 note 6.

¹⁵¹ Psalms 51:17.

¹⁵² *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 13, §2. My analysis below differs considerably from the interpretation by R. Shatz-Uffenheimer of this passage, ad locum. See also 'Or ha-'Emmet, fols. 17c, 36c and the passage by R. Israel of Kuznitz, translated by Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, p. 94. See also Dan, *On Sanctity*, p. 357.

process and enter into a state of awe and reverence. Thus, what is being described is hardly a quietistic situation, although in other texts such a position is expressed in other Hasidic discussions.¹⁵³

One key issue for an understanding of Hasidism, though less crucial to the basic premise here is the fact that the Hasidic author distinguishes from the divine presence speaking from within, from the Holy One, blessed be He, who concentrates upon the praying person. These two aspects of the divine realm are most likely the well known pair of *quedesha' berikh hu' u-shekhniteih*, the Holy One, and His *Shekhinah*. This is a sexually differentiated pair and its appearance in and within the human body may point to the achievement of one of the most important kabbalistic ideals: the union of the supernal male and female, called *Yihud*. However, unlike the main theosophical-theurgical school of Kabbalah, in which this union is an event that takes place within the supernal world, in the above passage the union between the human and the divine takes places here below, and the body of the prayer is the locus for the divine erotic encounter. The *Shekhinah*, speaking from the throat of the person who prays, presumably induces the contraction of the transcendental divine and its descent.¹⁵⁴ This concept of an almost instant trigger is corroborated by another early Hasidic statement:

Before he begins to pray, he should reflect [upon the fact that] he is prepared to die while he is praying as a result of his [intense] concentration. There are, in fact, some [Hasidim] whose concentration in prayer is so intense that, were nature left to itself, they would die after uttering no more than four or five words in God's presence, blessed be He [...] In reality, it is by God's great mercy, blessed be He, that strength is given him to complete his prayer and yet remain alive.¹⁵⁵

Thus after reciting only a few words of the prayer someone may enter into an ecstatic state, just as in the earlier text in which after the pronunciation of the opening verse, the *Shekhinah* overtakes the individual. However, the mystical

¹⁵³ See Shatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, pp. 200-202.

¹⁵⁴ For the assumption that the recitation of the Eighteen Benedictions is a time of theosophical intercourse see the statement quoted in the name of the Besht by R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 88c. I plan to deal more with this issue elsewhere.

¹⁵⁵ *Keter Shem Tov*, fol. 18b; See also Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, pp. 93-94. See also the testimony of R. Moses Eliaquim Beriy'ah concerning his father, the Maggid of Kuznitz, *Da'at Moshe*, fol. 73a.

experience does not stop with the entry of the *Shekhinah* into the human body, but rather continues as long as the prayer lasts. The very act of prayer and the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* are concomitant. The brevity of the parts of prayer which precede the ecstatic moment, or the caesura of normal consciousness and the near-death experience, according to the last passage, are quite crucial. In the last two quotes, as in one of the major sources of the Hasidic way of prayer mentioned above, namely the passage found in the *Tur*, the awe inspired by the feeling of the divine presence is quintessential for intense prayer. This emotionally loaded state of consciousness precedes the very beginning of prayer, and contributes to the immediate triggering of an attainment of an altered state of consciousness. In another statement from a book by the Great Maggid, when the person praying becomes aware that he is standing before God:

And is aware of the nature of the utterances and combinations [of utterances] and names and the lights which are in them, and cleaves to them in an extremely marvelous manner, then he turns into a state of ‘face to face’, with the utterances [...] in the secret of the divestment of materiality.¹⁵⁶

The verbal nature of liturgical activity which may end in an erotic union, is explicit here.¹⁵⁷ The ‘lights’ referred to in this quote are another term for the ‘spiritual forces’ dealt with earlier. They are, according to another passage from the Great Maggid, infused in the utterances by the very process of praying:

By means of the prayers of Israel the new influx and vitality are drawn downwards onto the pronounced letters, combinations [of letters], and utterances.¹⁵⁸

According to his contemporary, R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy:

Indeed, any worthy person who prays cleaves by his thought to Him, may He be blessed, and the drawing down of the influx is not necessary as it is possible that this [kind of] prayer is better [when performed only] in thought [...] since this prayer needs no vessel in order to draw the influx downwards.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 330. Compare also *ibidem*, p. 335.

¹⁵⁷ For more on the eroticism of prayer in Hasidism see the passage quoted above from *ibidem*, p. 13, and the bibliography adduced in Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, ‘Concluding Remarks’, section 3.

¹⁵⁸ *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 335.

¹⁵⁹ *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, fol. 167b.

The view of mental prayer as the highest level of prayer is obviously connected to Cordovero's statement that *kavvanah* is higher than utterances.¹⁶⁰ The mystic can cleave to God in two ways: to the divine power when drawn down in the mundane world in sounds included an oral liturgical performance or through mental cleaving, which takes place in the transcendental realm by a Neo-Platonic/Neo-Aristotelian ascent of the human to the divine mind located on high, where the process of drawing down takes place by thought alone.¹⁶¹

These views represent combinations of magical and mystical events. The magical aspect is represented by the drawing down of the supernal power, and, according to Cordovero and his followers, its use in more practical issues. The mystical facet is represented by the ideal of cleaving during the uttering of the letters of prayer, an ideal which is paralleled by the adherence to the letters of the Torah according to a view attributed to the Besht.¹⁶² In both cases, the experience of encountering the divine takes place within the letters of a canonical text when performed ritualistically by the mystic. Thus, the mystic does not attain an experience that transcends dramatically the nature of the technique, but rather encounters an entity created by the use of this technique. This entity enables the cleaving to the divine. Interestingly enough, though only the Besht is mentioned by name, R. Meir Harif indicates that he received this advice from other masters of his generation as well, a remark which may highlight the impact on pre-Hasidic masters contemporary to the Besht of the Cordoverian vision of talismanic practices with their mystical facets, as discussed in section 4 above.

7. RITUALS AND TECHNIQUES

Chapters 3 and 4 have dealt with what I call nomian rituals; i.e. patterns of behavior which were canonized in rabbinic literature as religious imperatives. Nevertheless, the points made concerning these two types of commandments

¹⁶⁰ See Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, Gate 27, ch. 2; II, fol. 59c. See also idem, *Derishot*, p. 84. Compare also to Abulafia's view of performing operations with letters on each of these three levels; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 19-21. Moreover, compare to Cordovero's view discussed in Idel, 'The Magical and Theurgical Interpretation', p. 53.

¹⁶¹ See also R. Barukh of Kossov, 'Amud ha-'Avodah, fols. 34c, 201b. On the history of the cleaving thought, *Mahashavah deveqah*, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 46-49. Note that R. Barukh often used the noun *hishtalshelut* in contexts related to prayer and its magical effects.

¹⁶² See above, chapter 2, section 4.

may also hold for other cases which cannot be dealt with here, such as the definition of the Sabbath as a special moment for spiritual arousal. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, in some cases in ecstatic and Safedian Kabbalah, and in Hasidism, the time and the rituals of Sabbath were seen as especially propitious for spiritual elation.¹⁶³ However, I would not generalize from these few cases that cast rituals as techniques to the broader assumption that the entire spectrum of rabbinic commandments was seen in such a technical manner. Rather there is a certain correlation between the more continuous performance of a certain commandment and its chances of becoming a short trigger or a mystical technique. For instance, the commandment of *shemittah* or *yovel*, the cessation of certain activities in respectively the seventh and the forty-ninth year, can hardly become a mystical technique. In general, most of commandments connected to seasonal patterns of rituals, to use to Theodor Gaster's term,¹⁶⁴ were less likely to become a mystical technique among groups of mystics who lived in Jewish societies disassociated from agricultural practices. Neither did the many commandments that consist of prohibitions become techniques. The techniques surveyed above consist basically of linguistic practices, in which the activation of canonical texts, some of them known by heart, was quite easy, and enabled immediate access to mystical experiences.

The significance of the centrality of Cordoverian Kabbalah and its reverberations in the above discussions, compared to the relative neglect of Lurianism and its techniques is worth noting. Cordoverian theories, their sources and repercussions, operated with continua which are intact; in other words, they did not undergo a substantial ontical rupture as was the case for Lurianic Kabbalah. The process of withdrawal and the breaking of the vessels, two of the most fundamental events in Lurianic theogony and cosmogony, dramatically affected the possibility of a simple continuity, as appears in the more typical versions of emanation elaborated in theosophical Kabbalah. The imperative to restore the fallen divine sparks to their pristine places before the catastrophe involves a lengthy process of reparations and amending which may also have repercussions on the human soul, but this is rarely understood in terms of an intensive immediate contact with the divine. To a certain extent,

¹⁶³ See M. Idel, 'Sabbat: Zeitkonzepte in der juedischen Mystik', *Das Ordnen der Zeit*, eds., T. Schabert/M. Riedl, Wuerzburg 2003, pp. 47-73.

¹⁶⁴ *Thespis, Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, New York 1961, pp. 23-107.

Lurianic myth is similar to other myths of the creation of the world from a primordial anthropos who has been fragmented, one which is found in various archaic modes of thought.¹⁶⁵ Although a technical path similar to that of the discussions above is found in R. Hayyim Vital's *Sha'arei Qedushah*, a volume intended to show the path to prophecy and cleaving to God, both his sources and the structure of the book are not Lurianic but belong to much earlier, primarily ecstatic and Cordoverian forms of Kabbalah.

¹⁶⁵ See Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, p. 121 and the myths described by Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos and Society*, Cambridge, Mass. 1986.

Conclusion

1. MORE ON THE ROLE OF VOICE IN JEWISH MYSTICISM

This book has analyzed a number of vocal practices that were part and parcel of certain rituals. What emerges from this study is the importance of an *imaginaire* of language that operates semantically and para-semantically, in addition to being ontologically continuous or ‘cord-like’ and dynamic. Symbolic understanding of language is a dominant feature in Jewish mysticism, but the talismanic approach to language deserves to be given its rightful place. Words of power weighed much more heavily in the general economy of kabbalistic literature than the mentalistic understanding of this lore typical of modern research which basically evaluates linguistic experience on the basis of semantics.

This reassessment of the nature of Jewish mysticism and the focus on linguo-theologies should not come as a surprise given the crucial role played by the divine voice in the Scriptures. God, who is found in the ‘still small voice’ according to the first Book of Kings, 19:13, was sought and, as we have seen, even attracted there according to later Jewish texts. In other words, Kabbalah presents important instances of a linguovert form of mysticism. It not only emphasizes the holiness of the Hebrew language in a way reminiscent of Muslim and Hindu mystical approaches to their respective languages, but also assumes that mystical experience can be attained through language.

Western Christian mysticism views the human soul and the introvert path as the major locus of mystical experience and the technique for its attainment, respectively. Nature mysticism, religious or secular, prefers the extrovert path, because the world is defined as the place of mystical encounter. In many cases, God Himself is the space where He encounters man, and this can be viewed as a theovert mysticism. In Kabbalah, there are numerous instances where language is the locus of the mystical encounter. However, unlike all the other forms of mysticism, where the locus of the experience exists long before the mystical experience, the linguovert mysticism starts, in some cases, with the creation of this locus by the mystic himself, as a *sine qua non* condition for his mystical experience. This assumes an active approach, because without human initiative, the contours of experience cannot even be defined. The speaking man, and not

God as in more the overt types of religiosities, is the main bridge builder. Language can be envisioned as an expression of the soul, of the subjective, which nevertheless takes place in nature; i.e. in space, and is intended, according to some views, to attract God into it. From this standpoint, linguovert mysticism is a fairly comprehensive approach as compared to the other kinds of mysticism. Unlike the soul, nature, or God, which can be experienced, and often times were presented as places for solitary experience, language has a prominently connective social role and the type of mysticism I have described above assumes that God may be encountered precisely by means of the most social of human tools, when it can be used in an asocial manner, as was case for ecstatic Kabbalah. Although the written text that was so crucial for generations of kabbalists was conceived of as an iconic representation of the divine, other kabbalists and many Hasidic masters considered it to be precisely the tool for overcoming the distance between themselves and God, a way to reduce the importance of textuality by establishing a direct encounter by both proclamation and manifestation to counteract a certain alienation, or what Ricoeur called *Verfremdung*. The move from a hypersemantic type of mysticism to a hyposemantic one, which is so clear in the transition from certain topics found in various types of Kabbalah to Hasidism, is one of the reasons for the much wider dissemination of the latter. This is why mystical experiences were so deeply connected in hyposemantic forms to the creation of sonorous momentary meso-cosmoi in which God could be encountered.

The paramount importance of voice is apparent as early as the *Book Bahir*, one of the first kabbalistic documents. It contains a lengthy discussion in which voice is not only presented as a momentary proclamation of a divine message, but is rather a permanent manifestation of the divine powers. There are ten voices, which may be divided into three supernal and hidden, and seven lower and more manifest ones. Moreover, voice is conceived of as power which manifests itself in the various realms of reality, in the wood and the desert, on the water and in history.¹

The first very obvious fact is that the book of the *Zohar*, though a written document, is permeated with discussions and sermons assigning the oral dimension of religion a very crucial role, comparable to a rabbinic stricture. Voices are of paramount importance in this book. In a certain way they play the role of *persona* in Greek dramas: they appear and disappear frequently and mediate between the mundane and the supernal worlds. Interestingly enough,

¹ See *Bahir*, ed. Abrams, §§ 29–33, pp. 133–137.

voice is said to ascend on high to a greater extent than words.² It is difficult to overestimate their impact in the general economy of this book. More technically, a short passage in this book dealing with the effect of a loud voice is worth examining. The *Zohar* describes a feminine figure who, out of her love and because of separation from her beloved, become smaller and darker, like a small dot – the letter *yod*. Then the powerful men who were her hosts shout out ‘like strong lions’. The supernal lover hears that his beloved loves him as he loves her. He comes out of his palace in response to the shouts together with his retinue and finds his beloved small, dark, and ugly: imageless. He kisses her and embraces her, and she begins to grow back, regaining her size and beauty.³

The anonymous kabbalist argues that she regains her dimensions because of the shouting of her retinue, and that the acts of sinners cause the reduction in her size and beauty, turning her once again into an invisible dot. The biblical verse which serves as the justification for the description of these powerful men who caused the growth of the feminine manifestation is ‘the mighty ones possessing power, who perform His word’.⁴ In fact, the verse from Psalms refers to angels whereas the *Zohar* reinterprets the phrase as referring to kabbalists. Their shouts, which represent their power, recreates the full stature of the word, *davar*, which is ostensibly a symbol for a feminine manifestation.⁵ The use of the verb ‘osei, those who perform, is employed in the *Zohar* and by some

² See, e.g., II, fol. 111ab; III, fol. 105a. See also the entire discussion of R. Meir ibn Gabbai, who uses several Zoharic passages, *'Avodat ha-Qodesh*, III, ch. 4, fol. 27d-28a, which are also copied and expanded in R. Barukh of Kossov, *'Amud ha-'Avodah*, fol. 213ab. In some texts the numerical equivalence between *qol*, voice, and *sullam*, ladder, is made in order to illustrate the ascending nature of voice in worship. See, e.g. R. Eleazar of Worms, *Perush ha-Roqeah*, ed. J. Klugmann, Benei Beraq 1986, I, p. 222; R. Isaac 'Ezovi, *'Aggudat 'Ezov*, p. 26; R. Moses Cordovero, *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 13, Jerusalem 1985, p. 164.

³ See *Zohar*, III, fol. 191a; On this text see Georges Vajda, *L'Amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Age*, Paris 1957, pp. 227-228, Melila Helner-Eshed, ‘If You Awaken and Arouse Love: The Language of Awaking in the *Zohar*’, *Kabbalah* 5 (2000), pp. 348-349 (Hebrew). On the last *sefira* as a dot see Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'Orah*, I, pp. 166-167.

⁴ Psalm 103:20.

⁵ For logos as a feminine power in Philo see Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, ch. 2 note 33. On speech, *dibbur*, as a symbol for the last *sefira* see Mopsik, ‘Pensée, Voix et Parole’, Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 180-182; Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Construction of the Shekhinah in the Messianic Theosophy of Abraham Cardoso’, *Kabbalah* 3 (1998), p. 111 note 111.

kabbalists in that school of thought in a theurgical manner; i.e. as creating something in the divine realm.⁶ Therefore, the loud shouting not only alerts the lover to the love and suffering of his beloved, functioning as an erotic trigger (what is called in other contexts the ‘female water’), but also aggrandizes her by adding power to her diminished body. Here the isomorphic induction of a supernal union does not function: in this case the Zoharic scheme is concerned with incrementing power, and less with a process of sympathetic induction that enables a sexual encounter. Nevertheless, there is a clear-cut affinity between the act that augments the feminine; i.e. the shouting, and the symbol associated with her – the word. The increase in supernal powers by sounds and voices is an ancient one. In Irenaeus’ description of Marcus the gnostic, we learn about angelic powers:

And these powers being all simultaneously clasped in each other’s embrace, sound out the glory of Him by whom they were produced; and the glory of that sound is transmuted upwards to the Propagator.⁷

The transmission of the sound of the powers is reminiscent of the augmenting power in the divine realm known as ‘dynamis’ in rabbinic sources. The powers referred to by Marcos are seven angelic beings, corresponding to the seven Greek vowels. In one of the most seminal formulations on the nature of Kabbalah, Abulafia stresses the importance of voice:

In order to understand my intention regarding [the meaning of] *qolot* [voices] I shall hand down to you the known *qabbalot*: some of them were passed down from mouth to mouth from the sages of [our] generation, and others I received from the books called *sifrei qabbalah*⁸ composed by the ancient sages, the kabbalists, blessed be their memory, concerning wondrous topics; and other [traditions] bestowed on me by God, blessed be He, which came to me from *ThY*⁹ in the form of the Daughter of the Voice, [*bat qol*], these being the higher *qabbalot* [*elyonot*.¹⁰]

⁶ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 184–189; Yehuda Liebes, ‘Zohar and Eros’, *Alppayim* 9 (1994), p. 72 (Hebrew).

⁷ *Against Heresies* I:XIV, 7.

⁸ A list of ancient Jewish mystical books appears in a similar context in his epistle *Sheva’ Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 21.

⁹ In the manuscript: *MHTY*; it is possible that this is one of the many errors by the copyist of this manuscript which is, unfortunately, the sole extant. If so, we should read the sentence as follows: ‘which came to me in the form of *bat qol*’. However, it is possible

Like many of Abulafia's other treatments, understanding the plays on words are critical for a more comprehensive grasp of his thought. Abulafia clearly toys with the term *qabbalot* – i.e. kabbalistic traditions – in a highly original manner. By taking apart and rearranging the consonants of the word he extracts the phrase *bat qol*. Second, the alliteration in *qolot-qabbalot* plays a role in his discourse. He relates the notion of Kabbalah itself to voice, saying that he believes that he received traditions, in fact the highest ones, from a supernal voice. His axiology is straightforward. He attributes a higher status to what he heard from above than to what he learned from masters or studied in kabbalistic books. In fact in one of his letters he considers the revelation from the Agent Intellect as higher than the secrets he learned from various esoteric books.¹¹ As seen above, this cosmic intellect is interpreted as the primordial speech,¹² and his linguistic penchant, stemming at least in part from Ashkenazi influence, dramatically affected his concept of Agent Intellect. He claims that this intellect is the equivalent of the ‘sphere of the letters’.¹³ This theory, found as well in the early writings of R. Joseph Gikatilla, had an impact on one of R. Yohanan Alemanno's remarks about the sphere of the letters, another expression for the sphere of the intellect, which was a term used for the Agent Intellect: he identifies it as being the source of the powers to create a *golem*.¹⁴

This leads directly to the issue of the development of a magical theory of language. The main thrust in Jewish classical writings is that Hebrew is a powerful language. Maimonides' attempt to combat this view was rejected by the kabbalists, even by those who deeply admired the great eagle. Abulafia's writings and those of his entourage were the cornerstones of one of the most elaborate metaphysics of language ever constructed, and which remained influential in Jewish thought for several centuries. Through Cordovero and Israel Saruk, some of his theories, along with Ashkenazi material that reflected earlier traditions, contributed to the emergence of linguistic ontologies which

that Abulafia was alluding to the Greek form *THY*, namely God, in which case *MTHY* would mean ‘from God’. Abulafia uses the form *THYV* – presumably the Greek *Theos* – to refer to God in his earlier *Get ha-Shemot*, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, Ms. New York, JTSA 1801, fol. 4b.

¹¹ *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 21. See also Idel, ‘Maimonides and Kabbalah’, pp. 57–58.

¹² See ch. 1 notes 41, 42.

¹³ See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* pp. 11, 29–46, 101.

¹⁴ See Idel, *Golem*, p. 168.

presupposed the primacy of the linguistic over the theosophical anthropomorphic structure of '*Adam Qadmon*' who was thought to emerge out of the 231 combinations of letters.¹⁵ In a passage by one of the most original Hasidic thinkers, R. Nahman of Bratzlav, attributed to him by his faithful secretary, R. Nathan of Nemirov, he states:

All the sublime comprehensions that he receives are not so important to him. What is crucial is to introduce an utterance [*dibbur*] into the world since all the supernal and the mundane worlds depend upon each and every utterance which he utters to men'.¹⁶

The juxtaposition of comprehension, which may be purely mental or mystical, with the utterances spoken into the human world is illuminating. While comprehension may be a transient although sublime moment, what counts is its translation into words. Thus, even in the writings of the Hasidic masters who emulated silence in some instances, speech was still of paramount importance. The passage from the *Zohar* dealing with the impact of shouting on events taking place on high may have something to do not only with R. Nahman's ideas but also with the practice of shouting described in his writings¹⁷ and may be related to the 'sonorous community' I describe more fully below.

Interestingly enough, the utterances related to Torah and prayer are described by a contemporary of R. Nahman, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, as

¹⁵ See ibidem, pp. 148-154 and here, chapter 1, section 3 and chapter 2, section 4. On the 231 combinations of letters there is a long series of discussions in *Kabbalah*, some of which have been addressed in my book on the Golem, especially pp. 10, 81-82, 148-154 and see also R. Isaac Ḥaver, *Siyah Yishaq*, pp. 17, 306.

¹⁶ *Hayyei Moharan*, Jerusalem 1985, §374, pp. 255-256. I assume that this teaching should be understood in connection to the one that immediately precedes it, ibidem, §373, where the topic is how to educate disciples who will continue the teaching of the master forever, not only for a short period of time, as was the case with the Besht. See also ibidem, §§360-361, p. 250, where the problem of translating the sublime comprehension in words is discussed. On R. Nahman and silence see Yehuda Liebes, 'Nahman of Bratslav and Ludwig Wittgenstein', *Dimmui* 19 (2001), pp. 10-13 (Hebrew).

¹⁷ See his interpretation of the verse from Psalm 103 in *Liqqutei Moharan*, I fol. 27b. See also Piekarz, *Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*, p. 111. On some instances of shouting out the word *Hu' He*, namely God, in Jewish liturgy see Naphtali Wieder, *The Formation of Jewish Liturgy in the East and the West, A Collection of Articles*, Jerusalem 1998, vol. I, pp. 395-430 (Hebrew). For a brief discussion of silence see Judah ben Nissim ibn Malka, *Judeo-Arabic Commentary*, p. 22 especially R. Isaac of Acre's observation.

stemming from the highest divine power, *Keter*, in the context of a recurring view of the nation of Israel as only possessing power in its mouth.¹⁸ Their contemporary, R. Barukh of Medzibush, the grandson of the Besht, provides an even more striking description of speech when commenting upon the verse 'The mouth of God spoke'. He understood the form *Piy* not as a *status constructus* of God; i.e. the mouth of God, but as 'My mouth' and consequently he wrote in Yiddish, '*Mein moul redt Got*' namely 'My mouth spoke [out] God' 'since, he comments, each sound [literally 'letter'] and each word is Godhead'.¹⁹ In this context, the enormous emphasis on the importance of oral rituals in Hasidism is paralleled in this literature by the emergence of the phrase '*olam ha-dibbur*', the world of speech, as a lower ontological stage within the divine world.

Finally, in Hasidism, there was a dramatic increase in the role of music and melodies which accompany vocal performance of the ritual. This was not a question of theoretical approaches to music or ritual and music, as found in so many medieval sources, but of actual musical practices which involved adapting melodies from the surroundings and more rarely even the composition of melodies, and an attribution of extraordinary powers to musical performance.²⁰

The position taken by the Mitnaggedim, the fierce opponents of the Hasidim, is striking in this context. In one of the classics of Mitnaggedim literature by R. Hayyim of Volozhin, it is said that:

At the very moment when someone studies Torah here below, each and every word that he utters are the very same things that emerge, so to say, from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, at the same moment.²¹

This emphasis on synchronicity is intriguing. It assumes a certain theurgical affinity between activities taking place in the lower and the higher realms, not

¹⁸ See *Liqqūei Torah*, II, fols. 58d-59a. Compare also to the Great Maggid, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, p. 52, and to the nineteenth century *Sefat Emmet*, IV, fol. 33bc: 'every one of Israel is capable of drawing down holiness upon him like the holiness of the high priest [...] by the power of the Torah [...] by the power of speech by mouth, which is the power of the Torah' and *ibidem*, II, fols. 5c, 24b; IV, fols. 2c, 34a, 97ab; V, fol. 117a. The phrase *Koah ha-Torah*, the power of the Torah, is found frequently in this book.

¹⁹ *Bośina Di-Nehora ha-Shalem*, Jerusalem 1985, p. 88.

²⁰ See Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, pp. 67-69; Idel, 'The Magical and Theurgical Interpretation', *idem*, 'Conceptualizations of Music in Jewish Mysticism', ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Enchanting Powers, Music in the World's Religions*, Cambridge, Mass. 1997, pp. 159-187.

²¹ *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, p. 217. See *ibidem*, pp. 217-218.

as the result of the kabbalist operating on an already existing structure on high, but as means of inducing the divine linguistic act by one's own utterances.

2. HEBREW LETTERS VERSUS PLATONIC IDEAS

The *Sefer Yeširah*, a book which left an indelible imprint on Jewish mystical literature as a whole makes it explicitly clear that the creation of the Hebrew letters was the first divine action. Many kabbalists never tired of repeating this stance. However, there are a few cases where kabbalists superimposed a linguistic realm which was ontologically higher than the metaphysical structure believed to govern the created universe.

Attempts to elevate the status of the letters to the highest levels of the sefirotic realm can be found from the earliest kabbalistic documents. According to R. Jacob ben Sheshet, the letters are the archetypes of creation: 'The essence of the letters is that they are the forms of all the creatures, and there is no form which does not have a likeness in the letters or in the combination of two or three or more' and according to another of his statements in this book: 'In the letters all entities which possess a form, are included'. Elsewhere, the same kabbalist defines the *sefirah* of *Binah* as the 'world of the letters'.²² Elsewhere, R. ben Sheshet describes the book of Torah as the locus of the ideas or forms, which are, presumably also in this case, letters.²³

Another kabbalist who argued that the concept of 'world of letters' was superior to the ten *sefirot* was R. Yoḥanan Alemanno, who lived in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in Northern Italy:

The kabbalists believe that Moses, peace be with him, had precise knowledge of the spiritual world, which is called the *World of Sefirot* and the world of Divine Names, or the World of letters. Moses knew how to direct his thoughts and prayers so as to enhance the divine influx, which the kabbalists call 'channels'; Moses' acts caused the channels to emanate upon the lower world in accordance with his will. By means of this influx, he created anything he

²² *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, pp. 154, 155, 150.

²³ See his *Sefer ha-'Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon*, ch. 18 in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, vol. 2, p. 409, Moshe Idel, 'Sefirot above Sefirot', *Tarbiz* 51 (1982), pp. 265-267 (Hebrew). Compare with R. Isaac ibn Latif's interpretation of this Platonic stand as formulated by Maimonides, see S. O. Heller Wilensky, 'Isaac ibn Latif - Philosopher or Kabbalist?' *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, pp. 188-189 and especially note 26.

wished, just as God created the world by means of various emanations. Whenever he wished to perform signs and wonders, Moses would pray and utter divine names, words and meditations, until these emanations were intensified. The emanations then descended into the world and created new supra-natural things. This is how Moses split the sea, opened up the earth and the like.²⁴

What emerges first from this passage is the affinity between the metaphysical world of letters and names and Moses' mode of action, using names, words and prayers. Alemanno sets up a correspondence between the two linguistic levels, where the lower level can impact on the higher. However, the supernal worlds of letters are portrayed as higher than the *sefirot* and as such can modulate the quantity of influx they receive. The divine names and letters, because of their superior status, affect the dynamism of the more widespread structure of divine attributes, and cause changes in the mundane world. Another important link between language and metaphysics is related to the Agent Intellect. Alemanno argues, in a manner reminiscent of a stand expressed by Iamblichus, that:

Just as the separate intellects perform wondrous acts in creatures, by means of the movements of the stars, so does the Agent Intellect perform wondrous and powerful miracles in the hyle, by means of the movements of the [five] places [of articulation] that are in the soul of man, [created] in order to pronounce the letters. And these are the miracles accomplished by means of the utterances emerging even from the mouth of persons who do not know, nor understand what are they uttering.²⁵

It was well-known in medieval Aristotelianism that the Agent Intellect influences various processes in the lower world, in both the psychological and the physical realms. The novel element here is the way human utterances can shape these processes. Man, like the spheres, can activate the hyle. The effect of an utterance does not depend upon the extent of the individual's understanding – a feature that is fascinating and bizarre if indeed the individual is seen as the organ of the Agent Intellect. Alemanno is not concerned with the emotional aspect of the talismanic activity either, by contrast with later Safed kabbalists

²⁴ *Collectanea*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 2234, fol. 8b; see Idel, 'Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations', p. 203; idem, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 204; idem, 'The Epistle of R. Isaac of Pisa in its Three Versions?', *Qohev 'al Yad*, NS 10 (1982), pp. 177–179 (Hebrew).

²⁵ *Collectanea*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 2234, fol. 3a. Compare to Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p. 110.

and the Hasidic masters. This is indeed a curious stroke of irony, since according to Maimonides, the Agent Intellect is the source of all knowledge. According to Alemanno, it is the source of linguistic, unlearned, magic which in this context is basically linguistic talismanics. In the next lines of this passage Alemanno says speech is an act that ‘receives the influx’. Even in ancient theurgical magic, as represented by one of its most famous exponents, Iamblichus, theurgy – in our nomenclature a phenomenon close to talismanics – expressly states that action rather than thought links the theurgist to God; however, he also indicates that the rites of the theurgists are not only acts beyond all understanding, as Alemanno does in the above quote, but also ‘unutterable symbols’.²⁶

Early in the seventeenth century, R. Abraham Cohen Herrera, a Lurianic kabbalist of converso extraction who was deeply immersed in Neo-Platonic thought put forward a speculative interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah in line with Neo-Platonic and scholastic principles. He suggested that the formative elements of the *malbush*, the divine garment formed of combinations of letters which preceded the process of emanation that generated ’Adam Qadmon as found in the Sarugian version of Lurianic Kabbalah, are Hebrew letters indicative of Platonic ideas, as pointed out by Alexander Altmann.²⁷ This is also the gist of a discussion of another kabbalistically oriented author R. Menasseh ben Israel, who cast the Platonic theory of ideas in terms of letters:

Plato considered that the world [...] was not produced by chance [...] it was formed by wise understanding and mind [...] So these plans of the universe which pre-existed in the divine mind are termed by him ideas [...] Now these ideas or plans [...] are the letters [of the divine language or modes of speech]. This is treated in various ways in the *Sefer Yesirah* [...] R. Joseph ben Carnebol, [Gikatilla] explaining in his *Sha'arei Sedeq* [...] Nahmanides [...] in the *Sefer Abitahon* [...] R. Barachiel in his *Peraqim*^{28,29}

²⁶ See *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, 2:11; Georg Luck, ‘Theurgy and Forms of Worship’, *Religion, Science and Magic*, ed. J. Neusner and alia, New York 1989, p. 186. On the other hand, language is also part of the theurgical ritual; see *ibidem*, p. 193 and Shaw, *ibidem*, pp. 110-111.

²⁷ See his ‘Lurianic Kabbalah in A Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera’s *Puerta del Cielo*’, *Hebrew Union College Anual* 53 (1982), p. 340; Yosha, *Myth and Metaphor*, pp. 189, 258-261.

²⁸ i.e., R. Berakhiel Qafman, a mid-sixteenth century Mantuan kabbalist. On this kabbalist and a printing of his book see Esther Barel, ‘Between Philosophy and

The latter two kabbalists who were active in Amsterdam differed from both ben Sheshet and Alemanno: in their opinion, the letters are higher than the *sefirot*, and function as supra-Platonic ideas. In the seventeenth century kabbalists, Platonic ideas and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were differentiated. These are different cultural strategies which, despite the basic disagreement between them, nevertheless are mutually involved in the issue of the relationship between the ontologies that stem originally from Greek philosophies and their Hellenistic and medieval reverberations, and linguistic ontologies. However the tinting of the supernal world by linguistic qualities is only part of an even broader phenomenon: the projection of certain features of rituals on high.

3. A RITUALLY CONSTELLATED UNIVERSE

The Talmudic descriptions of God performing rituals developed into an entire metaphysics of the Jewish rite in kabbalistic literature. Its beginnings differ from the more articulated systems found in early theosophical Kabbalah not so much by the impulse to elevate religious values to the status of supernal entities, but by creating types of relationships between these values when found in the supernal world. Performing rituals became not only important events inaugurated in *illo tempore* and reiterated from time to time in order to return to these special moments, but rather an ongoing enterprise taking place on high, which hence strengthened the obligation to perform these rituals continuously below. The technical perception of rituals as modes of access to the divine also served to accentuate them through their projection on high. The mythical Talmudic visions of God praying and studying Torah became part of a more general scheme which included not only an *imitatio Dei* via rites but also a means of reaching Him through these practices.

This principle has been illustrated in this volume as regards linguistic rituals. The vision of the praying *sefirot* and God as prayer, as seen in the previous chapter, represents a reification of the kabbalists' and the Hasidic masters' religious experiences. Human liturgical experiences were extended to higher realms, and described in explicit ritualistic terms. From this point of view there is no profound divergence between the vision of the divine realm in terms of Torah or in terms of prayer. In both cases, a process of highlighting the

Kabbalah: R. Barkhiel Job Kauffman's *Lev Adam*', *Kabbalah* 11 (2004), pp. 91-299 (Hebrew).

²⁹ *Conciliator*, vol. I, pp. 108-109.

hypostatic nature of the ritual events took place. Such a process of hypostatization of inner experiences has been posited as crucial for the understanding of the emergence of a series of hypostatic concepts in Judaism,³⁰ and in Gnosticism. According to some scholars, the Gnostic mythologies constitute a hypostatization of the Gnostics' and Plotinus' inner experiences.³¹ This seems to be the situation in some Vedic texts as well, where concepts like Speech, Sacrifice, or Belief were understood as distinct divinities, or in a series of Greek deities.³² Thus the ritualistic framework functions like a philosophical one, according to Hans Jonas, who recognized its importance for the emergence of certain forms of ancient mysticism in the West.³³

However, this process of objectivation and projection on high also took place for other Jewish rituals. They were part of the attempt to describe the mode of access to the divine realm. Referring to the notion that commandments performed below have an ontic status on high, R. Ezra of Gerona assumed that this accumulation of 'deposits' allows the return post mortem of the soul of these individuals:

'When you have eaten and are replete, then you shall bless the Lord your God'.³⁴ And the [meaning of the] blessing on the commandments is that when someone performs the commandments he must bless his Creator for the holiness which he hallowed us by means of the commandments. The performance of a *miṣvah* is the light of life. One who acts below maintains and sustains [*meqayyem u-ma'amid*] its power [*koah*] [on high] as it is said:³⁵ 'The commandment is a candle but the Torah is light' and he walks in the ways of light, and he does not depart from it, and he is immersed in it. When the soul is detached from the body, that light draws the soul, being like a magnet to that soul, as it is

³⁰ See R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, 'Some Psychological Aspects of Kabbalah', *Harvest* 3 (1956), pp. 77-96.

³¹ See the view of F.C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis*, Cambridge 1932, pp. 41-42 and E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, New York-London 1970, pp. 18-20; A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, Cambridge 1940, p. 113; McGinn, *The Golden Chain*, p. 85.

³² See Malamoud, 'The Sacrificial Scene', especially pp. 44, 49 note 25; Jean Hani, *Mythes, rites & symboles, les chemins de l'invisible*, Paris 1992, pp. 61-72, who even mentioned the sefirot as some form of *abstractions personifiées*, ibidem, p. 114 note 42.

³³ See his 'Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought', *Journal of Religion* 49 (1969), pp. 328-329.

³⁴ Deuteronomy 8:10.

³⁵ Proverbs 6:23.

written:³⁶ ‘He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor, his righteousness endures for ever’, because that divine manifestation draws her as it is written³⁷ ‘his horn shall be exalted with honor’, i.e. the splendor of the soul ascends and stands in a supernal and intimate place, within the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He.³⁸

The Geronese kabbalist capitalizes on a variety of rabbinic views which postulate continued existence as the outcome of an individual’s religious deeds in an ontic universe on high. For instance,

R. Shmuel ben Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonathan: Whoever performs a commandment in this world, it will welcome him [*meqaddemet ’oto*] in the Word-to-Come, as it is said:³⁹ ‘[then shall thy light break forth like the morning] [...] and thy righteousness shall go before thee [the glory of the Lord shall be thy rear guard].’⁴⁰

Or, to take another example, a Talmudic dictum, cited in the name of R. Shimon bar Yohai, the paragon of Jewish mysticism, indicates that: ‘The Holy, blessed be His name, has nothing else in the house of his treasures than a hoard of the fear of heaven’.⁴¹ According to R. Ezra, the commandments are ‘the body of purity and holiness’⁴² which correspond to the supernal *middot*, i.e. the divine attributes, which are arranged in an anthropomorphic order. R. Azriel of Gerona declared that ‘all the commandments are Glory’.⁴³

This process of hypostatization of ritual continued and became more

³⁶ Psalms 112:9.

³⁷ ibidem.

³⁸ See his *Commentary on Taryag Mišvot*, printed at the end of the *Commentary on the Songs of Songs*, attributed to Nahmanides, in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. H. D. Chavel, Jerusalem 1964, vol. 2, p. 524. For more on this text see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, III, p. 1158; Idel, ‘In the Light of Life’, pp. 192–201. On the ritual language implied in the concept of blessing, see Wade T. Wheelock, ‘The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation’, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1981), pp. 49–71.

³⁹ Isaiah 58:8.

⁴⁰ BT *Sotah*, fol. 3b.

⁴¹ BT *Berakhot*, fol. 33b. On the meaning and background of his assessment see E. Urbach, ‘Treasures Above’, *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, eds. G. Nahon - Ch. Touati, Louvain 1980, pp. 117–124.

⁴² See *Commentary on Taryag Mišvot*, *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, II p. 528.

⁴³ *Commentary on the ’Aggadot*, p. 38; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 123–124; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, III, p. 1157.

elaborate, and toward the end of the thirteenth century was formulated in a quite eloquent manner by R. Moses de León.⁴⁴ According to R. Menahem Recanati, an early fourteenth century kabbalist who followed certain Geronese and Castilian variants of these themes, the commandments and the *sefirot* are one and the same thing.⁴⁵ Elsewhere he writes that by performing a commandment below the individual brings down the divine influx on the commandment; i.e. the corresponding *sefirah* on high.⁴⁶ Furthermore, ‘each commandment is a branch and limb of the Supernal Form, so that by the completion of the entire Torah the Supernal Man is completed, as each and every *sefirah* of the ten *sefirot* [...] make, by being linked [together], one form’.⁴⁷

Taking up a passage in the *Book Bahir*, Recanati goes so far as to state that ‘all the commandments are comprised in God’.⁴⁸ According to a passage in R. Joseph Gikatilla, which was copied by ibn Gabbai, all the 613 commandments in the Torah are interwoven with the ten *sefirot*, which means that each *sefirah* is related to some of these commandments.⁴⁹ This view is also found, mutatis mutandis, in the anonymous influential Castilian book entitled *Sefer ha-Yihud*.⁵⁰ Thus, the anthropomorphic mode of thought that characterizes theosophical Kabbalah was tightly linked to the structuring of the commandments, which were sometimes described as depending upon the various *sefirot* as do human limbs.⁵¹ Again, according to an influential late thirteenth century kabbalist in Barcelona, R. Bahya ben Asher, though following the path of R. Ezra in the passage translated above – as E. Gottlieb pointed out:

The commandments are engraved on high, so that man has to raise his hands to them just as someone raises his hands in prayer and his ten fingers are [stretched out] to heaven, to suggest and direct the attention to something that

⁴⁴ See Elliot R. Wolfson’s introduction to his edition of *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, pp. 17–19 esp. note 31, 35, idem, ‘Mystical Rationalization’.

⁴⁵ *Commentary on the Rationales of the Commandments*, fol. 18a.

⁴⁶ ibidem, fol. 13c. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 188.

⁴⁷ *Commentary on the Torah*, fol. 23bc, and ibn Gabbai, ‘Avodat ha-Qodesh’, III, ch. 69, fol. 112bc discussed in Idel, ‘The Concept of the Torah’, pp. 68–70.

⁴⁸ ibidem, fol. 43c. For the *Book Bahir* see ed. Abrams, §125, p. 209.

⁴⁹ *Sha’arei Šedeq*, fol. 9b; ‘Avodat ha-Qodesh’, II, ch. 16, fol. 35cd.

⁵⁰ Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana 62, fol. 113a.

⁵¹ See Idel, ibidem, p. 190. See also above, chapter 3 section 1.

is on high [...] everyone who performs a commandment here below, holds to its root on high.⁵²

The individual does not only perform the commandments: he also worships their supernal roots or supernal existence. One further example in this context comes from a renowned mid-nineteenth century kabbalist already quoted several times above: R. Isaac Aizic Ḥaver. In one of his sermons he wrote that:

Truly the Torah and the Commandment are themselves supernal luminaries which, by dint of their emanational descent [*be-hishtalshelut*] by degrees, reach this world in a corporeal garment, and the person who performs them and intends to fulfill the will of God by his soul and spirit, his soul and spirit adhere to these supernal luminaries of the Torah and Commandment, and this is truly the reward in the next world.⁵³

Here the concept of constellation is obvious and the ritualization of the supernal world is obviously related to the possibility of bridging the gap between the human and the divine through ritual. However, although the rabbinic tradition regarded the divine realm as a persona who performs the commandments in the way a human does, in theosophical reinterpretations the commandments become part and parcel of the order that constitutes the divine. According to these kabbalists God does not choose to perform the commandments, as the rabbinic passages claim, or as a Jew does, but rather is the embodiment of the ritual, similar to the way Abulafia identified God with His name. In this context of the ritualization of metaphysics we can more readily grasp the identification of God with the Torah, and elsewhere, for instance in the book of the *Zohar*, his identification with the Sabbath, the *Shekhinah*, or the equating of Qaro's *Maggid* with the *Mishnah*, various *sefirot* with *Tefillah* (prayer) or the supernal realm consisting of 231 combinations of letters, as we saw earlier.

Two trajectories in the development of Jewish rituals in Jewish mysticism can thus be traced: on the one hand, they became more intense ways of

⁵² *Commentary on Avot* in ed. C. Chavel, *R. Bahia's Writings*, Jerusalem 1970, p. 534; Gottlieb, *The Kabbalah*, p. 73.

⁵³ *Siyah Yišaq*, p. 21. See also pp. 23, 230 where the author describes the revelation of the Torah as intended solely for facilitating the purification of the soul and its return on high. Compare also to the cosmic vision of the Torah in one of the major sources of Haver's thought, R. Ḥayyim of Volozhin's *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim*, p. 222. See also the Hasidic master R. Ḥayyim of Chernovitz, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, fol. 110d, who claims that the blessings stand in the supernal world, and the Torah and the commandments should be elevated on high.

worship, which in some cases became techniques. On the other hand, they became hypostatic, although quite dynamic entities, by being projected on high. Different as these two processes are, they interweave to create specific ontological cords, a shared tonality and a range of technical variants. This approach is similar to the definition of ritual presented in the anthropological writings of Jean-Thierry Maertens and Victor Turner, who argue that rites are intended to reduce anxiety and facilitate the encounter with the Other or the Unknown.

Interpreting the structure of the divine realm in terms of ritual helps situate the more specific discussions related to language presented in earlier chapters. Here, the divine structure is part of awareness of human and religious rituals. Unlike the Neo-Platonic triads, hierarchies and hypostases whose main purpose was to mediate between the unknown and the created world, or the separate intellects of the medieval Neo-Aristotelian thinkers, most theosophical kabbalists emphasized the functional role of metaphysical structures in terms of human religious activities. These are defined not only as means of comprehending a supernal notion of the divine, but also as channels of power, which can be directed and put to use. Rituals are not only indicative of the nature and specifics of the supernal maps, but also have an impact on them. Sometimes it is even difficult to separate kabbalistic metaphysics from rites and techniques. The intimate interpenetration of the two realms is a hallmark of kabbalistic thought. In light of the texts analyzed in the previous chapters, the main issue that should be raised when attempting to understand kabbalistic writings and experiences is not so much whether theology was influential, but whether the previously existing theology found outside Kabbalah was influenced by the performative aspects of Judaism when adopted by kabbalists. A religion gravitating around performance, it shaped its theologies in a direction that accentuated dynamism and manipulation of energy, at least for rabbinic literature, various kabbalists and Hasidic masters. A modern anthropologist suggests we look at ‘the kind of use which people put their symbols in everyday life, as regulators or as channels of power. That is, we should attend to their ideas about ritual efficacy, and less to the structure of their theoretical orientations.’⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols, Explorations in Cosmology*, Pantheon Books, New York 1982, pp. 11–12; On the effectiveness of ritual see Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, New York 1975, pp. 97–108. A very interesting treatment of the crucial role of ritual is also found in the more recent studies by Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans*,

4. SONOROUS COMMUNITIES: SOME SOCIOLOGICAL REMARKS

The two main Jewish religious rituals performed in public – prayer and reading of the Torah – are primarily vocal. The halakhic regulations as to their recitation are an essential part of Jewish ritual and, anthropologically speaking, any in-depth description of Judaism should focus on the role played by voice in communal rites. Insofar as the vast majority of members of communities are concerned, there is no reason to assume that an awareness of the intricacies discussed above is instrumental in significantly shaping their religious experience. The topics discussed in the previous chapters deal with conceptualizations and experiences of small numbers of elites, and not a widespread interpretation of Jewish practices. Nevertheless, the more customary experiences based on vocal religious activities did shape communities which were characterized, at least for those periods in which these rites were performed, by a shared sonorous environment. Jews are united because they share the same semantic world. They form a group more by experiencing a rhythm of daily life punctuated by similar sounds and acts than by shared study. As seen above, even such eminent representatives of more intellectually inclined versions of Kabbalah and Hasidism, such as R. Moses Cordovero and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, gave recitation a role greater than mere compliance with a halakhic stipulation. In other words, even some outstanding representatives of elite Jewish mysticism, though not all, did not attempt to devalue the importance of vocal activities, despite their acceptance of axiologies which elevated mental processes to an extremely high status.

Another rite which deserves examination in this context is the study of the Talmud in rabbinic academies. This intellectual preoccupation is a widely accepted practice and still involves devoting years to group study of Talmudic treatises, out loud, while debating, sometimes vociferously, controversies found in the tractates. Thus most rabbinic studies can be described as forming sonorous communities. As was pointed out as regards one of R. Shneur Zalman's passages discussed elsewhere, learning of the Oral Torah required much more intensified intellectual activity.⁵⁵ Moreover, there is evidence of

The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth, tr. P. Bing, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1983, pp. 29–34; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London 1973, especially pp. 112–118; the foreword by D. F. Pocock to Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, ibidem p. 4, and the references cited above ch. 1 note 12.

⁵⁵ See Moshe Idel, 'Die laut gelesen Tora, Stimmengemeinschaft in der juedischen Mystik', *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung. Zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der*

recitation of a Talmudic passage for its own sake, after its content had been absorbed. R. Jacob Isaac, better known as the Seer of Lublin, a famous Hasidic thaumaturge of the early nineteenth century, was reported to recite a page of Gemara' after studying it, without thinking about its content, *beli 'iuun*.⁵⁶ However, even more interesting than this apotheosis of voiced study of the Talmud and the mouthing cantillation of the Torah, which continued classical rabbinic regulations, is the development of oral study of kabbalistic books. There is evidence as to oral readings of the book of the *Zohar* in North Africa and Yemen from the late sixteenth century.⁵⁷ In Eastern Europe a similar practice is only documented from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when books dealing with secrets are mentioned.⁵⁸

Although oral study of texts and prayer was always part of attempts to enhance the memorization of the studied text – more than in the mere informative and supplicant reading of the Torah and prayer⁵⁹ – the outcome was the same: sounds became an integral part in rabbinic academies, as they were in the synagogue experience. Though somewhat different in their social and cultural structures – on the one hand the larger groups of those who prayed and read the Torah who were, on the average, less immersed in advanced Jewish studies; on the other the smaller group of students of Talmud – the active participation in the formation of a sonorous ambiance that encompassed the entire community and generated an actualization of canonical texts may be considered as one of the formative experiences of Jewish communities. The sonority created during these Jewish rituals distinguishes them from the

Stimme, eds. Th. Macho und S. Weigel, Berlin 2002, pp. 19–53, idem, 'The Voiced Text of the Torah', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 68 [Sonderheft] (1994), pp. 145–166.

⁵⁶ Cf. R. Israel ben R. Isaac Simḥah, 'Eser 'Orot, in his *Sefer Zekhut Yisrael* rpr, Jerusalem 1973, fol. 46b, §30.

⁵⁷ See Harvey Goldberg, 'The *Zohar* in Southern Morocco: A Study in Ethnography of Texts', *History of Religion* 29 (1990), pp. 249–251; Boaz Huss, 'Sefer ha-Zohar as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998), pp. 295–296.

⁵⁸ On oral study, including the study of Kabbalah, see the view of R. Dov Baer of Lubavitch, in Louis Jacobs, *On Ecstasy: A Tract by Dobh Baer of Lubavitch*, Chappaqua, New York 1963, p. 165. Ritualistic study of the *Zohar* out loud is also practiced among Yemenite Jews.

⁵⁹ See Israel Knohl, 'Between Voice and Silence: The Relationship between Prayer and Temple Cult', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), pp. 28–29 note 37.

greater solemnity characteristic of the performance of many rituals related to the reading of sacred texts. This is scarcely a unison of coordinated voices. Musically speaking the result is sometimes more like cacophony than symphony. The more traditional study of the Torah or prayer and even of the reading of the Torah often took place in an environment of discordant voices. This participation in loosely synchronized vocal activities is characteristic of a community which cooperates in major religious rituals but allows, or at least tolerates, individuals who study and pray at their own pace. The dominance of the Hasidic passages which emphasize the variety of meanings associated with varieties of sometimes melodic vocal performance, radically challenges the assumption that silent, or mental prayer was highly valued in Hasidism.⁶⁰

5. TECHNIQUES, METAPHYSICS, IMPORTS

The broader implications of linguistic continua can now be seen as a major counterpart of the different versions of the Platonic 'Great Chain of Being' as described by Lovejoy and McGinn. These studies are excellent illustrations of Whitehead's remark that Western philosophy is a commentary on Plato's thought. Lovejoy's treatment of the theme demonstrates the strength and the pervasiveness of the metaphysical impulse in Western thought, nourished originally by Greek sources and mediated by Arabic and Christian translations and commentaries. They all operate on the assumption that the lower is dependent on the higher but never, to the best of my knowledge, the reverse.⁶¹

The central role of the various forms of linguistic continua in Jewish mysticism testify to deliberate efforts to stress the descending, creative role of language, based on Genesis 1, and the semantic features of prophetic language, again a descending move, when associated with combinatory linguistic techniques from *Sefer Yesirah*. In Judaism, a culture based on the importance of language and texts written in the same sacred language, mysticism incorporates attempts to resist the sudden introduction of the metaphysical impulse absorbed by many Jewish thinkers since the Middle Ages. Language and in some cases also religious texts, are employed on several planes as part of techniques to attain paranormal experiences, each prompting an experience formed by accelerated human senses or thought, a phenomenon designated

⁶⁰ See Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, pp. 185-186.

⁶¹ See in particular McGinn, *The Golden Chain*, p. 175.

recently as empowerment.⁶²

According to the late thirteenth century ecstatic kabbalist R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah, after combining the letters he was able to produce so many innovations on intellectual issues that even ten copyists could not commit them to writing.⁶³ These efforts to intertwine linguistic and ritualistic elements into the fabric of metaphysics took place within structures which were new to Jewish culture, and these structures drew heavily themselves on the Greek and Hellenistic heritage. This is even more obvious in the case of the reverberations of the *aurea catena* in some of the continua described above. Some kabbalists, perhaps less than Jewish philosophers, attempted to put forward more complex theological systems, and hence a more complicated synthesis, but in the final analysis they too were substantially influenced by the various forms of Greek-Hellenistic metaphysics. The latter enabled the Jewish medieval thinkers to formulate the first broad theologies after Philo. The key question, however, is to define their center of gravity: were they first and foremost theologians, whose allegiance to Judaism also invited an interpretation of communal rituals, or were they members of a performing community in search of more a vibrant and comprehensive understanding of their practices? There is no satisfactory answer to this question. A positive answer to the first would validate the theologically oriented views of the scholars surveyed in the Introduction. I am inclined, however, to opt for the second possibility, and see the theological appropriations of the Jewish mystics from non-Jewish sources as adaptations which served their more performative attitudes. These particular modes of appropriation are, perhaps, the most conspicuous conclusion to be drawn from comparing the attitude of Jewish mystics as regards the image of the chain to their Neo-Platonic sources. Mystical experiences are moments in which the traditional axiology is reinforced by new interpretations, related to what Hollenback has called empowered human capacities.

Although it is obvious that Neo-Platonic and Hermetic materials were appropriated by Jewish authors in many forms of Jewish mysticism and philosophy, and in the context reviewed here, primarily the theory of the Great Chain of Being, there are still significant difference in emphasis between the Greek and Hellenistic sources and the kabbalistic and Hasidic ones. The former accentuated metaphysical plenitude to a much greater extent, discussing and articulating the principles of gradation and concatenation as part of a

⁶² See Hollenback, *Mysticism*, pp. 185–186, 282–283, 294–296, 612–613.

⁶³ Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, pp. 478–479.

comprehensive world view. In contrast, in most Jewish mystical sources the search for experiential plenitude dominates the literature, as in other cases in which the pursuit of experiential plenitude seems to provide one of the best explanations for the developments that took place since rabbinic literature,⁶⁴ through the emergence of the 'cord' *imaginaire*, the parallel intensification of rituals, and the centrality of technical performance. The emphasis on performance in the various ontologies influenced them, as part of an anthropocentric vision of reality, not only when the ecstatic and magical models dominated kabbalistic thought, but also in the case of theocentric, theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, where the role of human religious acts remained quintessential. kabbalists only rarely subscribed to medieval world views as described by C.S. Lewis:

Our highest privilege is to imitate it⁶⁵ in such measure as we can. The Medieval Model is, if we may use the word, anthropoperipheral. We are creatures of the Margin.⁶⁶

Kabbalists and Hasidic masters would indeed agree that they constitute the lower extremity of the ontic cords or chains; however, they would scarcely admit that they are marginal beings in the general economy of reality. To mention just a few examples: R. Abraham Azulai, whose views have been quoted several times above, devoted an entire passage to arguing that a righteous man is higher than an angel.⁶⁷ His contemporary, R. Sabbatai Sheftel discussed the superiority of man as compared to all the other creatures which emerged, like him, by a process of chained emanation, through man's unique power to move the chain of emanation, as da Vidas' also claimed.⁶⁸ This

⁶⁴ See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 283-289, idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 423-427.

⁶⁵ The celestial dance as described by the interpreter of Plato, *Chalcidius*.

⁶⁶ *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge 1967, p. 58. See also Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 101-102, and the continuation of the quote above, ch. 1 note 104 from Robert Will's book. Immediately after this passage he wrote that 'Nor does the mutual action of the two currents exclude the primacy of the Divine action; for this is manifest not only in the descending current of the Word, or Revelation, and of sacramental action, but also in its immanent action within the life of souls'. Cf. Underhill, *Worship*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁷ See *Hesed le-'Avraham*, fol. 26ac. See also R. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, pp. 11, 131, R. Isaac Haver, *Siyah Yishaq*, pp. 197, 201-203.

⁶⁸ See Sack, *The Guardian of the Pardes*, pp. 183, 186, 189, 205.

position was later appropriated and elaborated in Hasidism.⁶⁹

6. FROM UNIVERSALISM TO PARTICULARISM

Jewish liturgy, even more than the Torah, is a particularistic religious enterprise. Though also drawing on the Bible, the liturgical corpus is more dependent upon post-biblical Jewish bodies of literature, including mystical ones. The connection made in some of the sources between prayer and the Great Chain of Being represents an adaptation of the cosmic concerns of the Neo-Platonists to a cult that is characteristic of a relatively small group of people, who developed a specific language. These theurgists could perform their acts because their souls were directly and permanently connected to the supernal world – again an appropriation of a Neo-Platonic premise, but they restricted this relationship to the souls of the Jews alone.

Moreover, the particularistic nature of this adaptation was coupled with an accent on the theurgical and magical powers inherent to specific Jewish rites, a view that gave these theurgists a sense of the superiority of Judaism over other religions. While transforming Jewish rites into cosmically and theurgically influential acts, the kabbalists and the Hasidic masters also Judaized the cosmos, just as they did with the divinity, as we have seen above. In terms more widespread in European intellectual history, Jewish mysticism achieved an intensification of the imagined effects of Jewish rituals seen as techniques, by enchanting both God and the universe. These forms of enchantment were achieved by creating a resonance between specific techniques and specific cords. In some cases, for instance in Cordoverian and Hasidic theories, God was brought into the world by assuming that He could be drawn down, in other cases, the world was brought into God, by means of the complexity of divine attributes which serve as powers appointed to the world and subject to influence through kabbalistic rituals. These two types of enchanted realms could be affected by human religious deeds. In both cases theories elevated particular Jewish rituals and mystical techniques. These enchanted chains served as a type of collective narcissism, characteristic of many kabbalistic schools.

The growth of enchantment is evident from mid-sixteenth century Safed kabbalistic literature and reached its peak in Hasidism. It ran counter the more

⁶⁹ See Ada Rapoport-Albert, 'God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship', *History of Religions* 18 (1979), pp. 296-325.

widespread vector in Christian Europe that led from an enchanted to a disenchanted world. Some kabbalistic and Sabbatean sources which deal with the 'chain of souls'; i.e. the succession of masters who transmit a certain tradition, a theory reminiscent of earlier Jewish sources which also used the term *shalshelet*, or *shalshelet ha-qabbalah*, the chain of tradition, have a significant debt to Muslim sources, as pointed out by A. Elqayam.⁷⁰ As part of the controversy between two rival claims regarding the Jewish or Muslim role of Jerusalem, some kabbalistic works written in the Land of Israel from the mid-sixteenth century onward placed the Land of Israel at the lower extremity of the cosmic chain, and attributed specific theurgical powers to its inhabitants.

Clearly enchantment was not the only spiritual and intellectual influence in Judaism in the pre-modern period, and its counterweight is easily discernable in other centers of Jewish life, in central Europe for example, which adhered much more to the patterns of the Enlightenment which extended the scientific revolution of the sixteenth century. The medieval encounter between Kabbalah and Greek thought primarily involved the kabbalists with Aristotelianism. During the Renaissance, Kabbalah encountered Neo-Platonism and in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Hasidism was confronted with the last main avatar of Greek thought, European Enlightenment. These two diverging views clashed when Hasidism, and a few kabbalists as well, were forced to deal with Jewish representatives of Enlightenment who derided the enchanted, basically linguistic, world of Hasidism.⁷¹

⁷⁰ 'Ereš ha-Sevi', pp. 158–164.

⁷¹ See Piekarz, *Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*, pp. 27–55, 183–196.

Appendix

On Colors in Technique and in Experience

In the above chapters I have concentrated on linguistic techniques and the affinities between them and their effects on the experiences of the Jewish mystics. Here I would like to introduce an example that demonstrates the affinities between technique and experience in a case in which linguistic elements play only a partial role.¹

In a series of kabbalistic writings since the end of the thirteenth century, there are instructions concerning the visualization of the letters of the divine names as part of the kabbalistic intention during prayer.² These instructions stem from a specific kabbalistic school, whose two main protagonists were R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi³ and R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid.⁴ While only the instructions related to visualization are conceived of as part of

¹ To be sure, as we will see below visualization is strongly connected to letters, and the forms of letters as visualized are a matter that should be investigated separately. However, the great importance of imagined colors distinguishes the passages to be dealt with below from those dealt with in the previous chapters.

² See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 103–111; idem, ‘Kabbalistic Prayer and Colors’, *Approaches to Judaism in medieval times*, ed. D. Blumenthal, vol. 3, Atlanta 1988, pp. 17–27; idem, ‘*Kavvanah* and Colors: A Neglected Kabbalistic Responsum’, *Tribute to Sara, Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Presented to Professor Sara O. Heller Wilensky*, eds. M. Idel, D. Dimant, S. Rosenberg, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 1–14 (Hebrew); idem, ‘An Anonymous Commentary on *Shir ha-Yihud*’, *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, eds. K-E Groeizinger and J. Dan, Berlin, New York 1995, pp. 151–154.

³ On this kabbalist see Moshe Hallamish’s preface to *Kabbalistic Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, Jerusalem 1985, pp. 11–27 Hebrew; Georges Vajda, ‘Un chapitre de l’histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la philosophie: La polémique anti-intellectualiste de Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi de Catalogne’, *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 23 (1956), pp. 45–144; Gershon Scholem, ‘The Real Author of the *Commentary on Sefer Yesirah* Attributed to R. Abraham ben David and His Works’, *Qiryat Sefer* 4 (1927–1928), pp. 294–295 (Hebrew).

⁴ For the bibliography on this kabbalist see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 126–134, 215–224.

kabbalistic prayer, the former deals with visualization of colors and divine letters in other instances, more particularly in the case of his innovative understanding of the creation of the *golem*.⁵ In this case the concept of an appearance is striking, and I assume that the technique of visualization of divine names and letters in certain colors culminates in the emergence of the imaginary anthropoid.⁶ Since I have dealt elsewhere in some detail with the question of the *golem* and the technique of its creation in imagination, according to R. Joseph Ashkenazi⁷ I would like to address another instance in the writings of this kabbalist here, one in which he deals with color-visualization techniques and color vision in the same text.

The sages of the philosophers have already written on the issue of prophecy, saying that it is not improbable that there will be a person to whom matters will appear in his imaginative faculty, comparable to that which appears to the imaginative faculty in a dream. All this [could take place] while someone is awake, and all his senses are obliterated, as the letters of the Divine Name [stand] in front of his eyes,⁸ in the gathered colors.⁹ Sometimes, he will hear a voice,¹⁰ a spirit, a speech, a thunder and a noise with all the organs of his hearing, and he will see with his imaginative faculty with all the organs of sight, and he will smell with all the organs of smell, and he will taste with all the organs of taste, and he will touch with all the organs of touch, and he will walk and levitate.¹¹ All this while the holy letters are in front of his eyes, and its colors are covering it; this is the 'sleep'¹² of prophecy'.¹³

It is obvious that Ashkenazi is quoting a source, which he does not believe to be kabbalistic; since he was an opponent of philosophy, there is little doubt that he did not innovate a theory which became so important for him, or attribute it to people he criticizes, even more so when we easily discern several discussions on

⁵ Idel, *Golem*, pp. 119-124.

⁶ See *ibidem*, pp. 123-124.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 121-124.

⁸ See Psalm 16:8.

⁹ *Mar'ot ha-Sove'ot*.

¹⁰ *Qol, ruah ve-davar*: cf. *Sefer Yesirah* 1:9. See also below, note 15.

¹¹ The verb used here is *PRH*, which may point to levitation, or floating in the air or even may be connected to ascent. See also the various versions of the *Toledot Yeshu*, about floating in the air by resorting to divine names.

¹² *Tardemat ha-nevu'ah*; Cf., *Genesis Rabbah*, 17:5 p.156 .

¹³ *Kabbalistic Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, p. 223: See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 105.

colors in his writings as part of Kabbalah.¹⁴ In any case, the passage describes an experience of extraordinary sensations, which occur while the regular senses have been obliterated and this situation is explicitly connected to the letters of the divine name visualized using the faculty of imagination. However, what this quote does not mention is an experience in which colors occur as the result of the technique of visualizing them. However, before the above passage R. Joseph Ashkenazi adopts Maimonides' description of the psychology of prophecy as the translation of the intellectual influx that reaches human intellect from cosmic intellects into words and images by means of the faculty of imagination. In this context he writes that:

The influx will emanate onto the intellectual power and from it, it will emanate upon the [faculty of] imagination and it will appear to him as though he sees a face of man speaking with him by voice, spirit and speech.¹⁵ The visions¹⁶ of that man are sometimes by means of letters [possessing] the color¹⁷ of copper or the color of snow¹⁸ or the color of the [man's] clothing (the *baddim*)¹⁹ or like the color of the gold of *opaz*²⁰ or the color of *tarshish*²¹ or the color of lightening²² or like a torch of fire²³ or in the likeness of copper²⁴ or in the likeness of the color of the rainbow²⁵ or in the likeness of *tekhelet*²⁶ or in the likeness of fire or in the likeness of water, or he switches between mixtures²⁷ of these colors.²⁸

When describing prophetic visions, Ashkenazi resorts to concepts and terms

¹⁴ See R. Joseph Ashkenazi's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, fols. 9d, 18b, 30b, etc.

¹⁵ See note 10 above.

¹⁶ *Mar'otav*.

¹⁷ *Mar'eh*.

¹⁸ This way of referring to white is found in this kabbalistic school several times. See, e.g., Idel, 'Kawanah and Colors: A Neglected Kabbalistic Responsum', p. 5.

¹⁹ See Daniel 10:5.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem, 10:6 and see also Ezekiel 1:16.

²² Daniel 10:6.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ezekiel 1:28.

²⁶ Presumably a sort of blue.

²⁷ *Ta'arot*. This term points, on the one hand to a mixture of colors in general, like those related to the median sefirot, *Tiferet* and *Yesod*, and possibly, though less plausibly in this specific context to the mixtures of colors as reflecting the nature of the last *sefira*, on the other.

²⁸ *Kabbalistic Commentary on Bereshit Rabbah*, p. 223.

found in the quote in the name of the philosophers. Most remarkable in this context is the occurrence of the phrase from *Sefer Yesirah* in both the description of the vision and in the technical passage. Likewise the occurrence of the concept of letters together with colors points in the same direction: unlike Maimonides, who supplied some of the concepts occurring here, but did not elaborate a specific technique to reach prophecy, Ashkenazi writes about an experience that lasts as long as the colors imagined by the aspirant are in front of his eyes, all this, I assume, in his imagination. This passage reflects an attempt to translate the terms found in Daniel 10:5-6 and Ezekiel 1 into paradigms for an imaginal world that can be constructed by the mystic by his imaginative power. It is interesting to point out that Ashkenazi, like Abraham Abulafia before him, adopted Maimonides's definition of prophecy, but adapted it to a technique that has nothing to do with the great eagle's theory.²⁹ To be sure: Abulafia was more faithful to Maimonides, as he gave the concept of intellect the main role in the revelatory process, while it seems that Ashkenazi was, to a certain extent at least, closer to Sufi views which attributed to the faculty of imagination a more positive role.³⁰

The emergence of visions related to entities which, at least in their majority, are connected to colors, is ostensibly also related to biblical instances dealing with revelations, as I have pointed out in the footnotes. The somewhat exegetical structure of the passage, namely the allusions to biblical phrases, invites the question as to what extent the above passages deal with an experience of the kabbalist himself: his material is found in the writings of philosophers, as he admits explicitly, and the revelations themselves are hinted at by biblical phrases. In this case, like in many others, this kabbalist does not

²⁹ On Abulafia's prophetology see M. Idel, *The Writings and Doctrines of R. Abraham Abulafia* Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976, I, pp. 86-128 Hebrew, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*.

³⁰ See the impact of the Sufi theory of '*Alam al-mithal*', the imaginal world, which is also an ontological understanding of imagination, on Ashkenazi's contemporary, R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Ḥarar, in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 73-89. For more on imagination in Kabbalah and Hasidism see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, and Tzvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness in the Work of R. Nahman of Bratslav*, Tel Aviv 2003 (Hebrew). In my opinion, it is important to distinguish between clear references to the imaginative power and its role in mystical experience and representation, and what a scholar may guess that this power may play when appropriate terminology is not found in the texts, before a phenomenology of the place of the visual in Judaism has been formulated.

resort to a narrative gravitating explicitly around his experience, but prefers more objective modes of speech. Nevertheless, the above passages explicitly claim revelatory experiences. However, even if we may concede, at least in principle, that R. Joseph Ashkenazi's discussions do not necessarily express his own experiences or those of others, nevertheless the theoretical nexus between the technique, (which I assume was not a theoretical proposal)³¹ and the alleged revelation induced by it, is still evident.

³¹ See the instructions to pray by resorting to visualization of the letters of the divine names in the material discussed in the studies mentioned in notes 2, 5, 7 above.

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